Real Talk:

Understanding Texas Latino Voters Through Meaningful Conversation

Texas Organizing Project Education Fund

CULTURE CONCEPTS
STORYTELLING & ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

By Michael Powell, Ph.D., Cecilia Ballí, Ph.D., and Betsabeth Monica Lugo, Ph.D.

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The Texas Organizing Project Education Fund (TOPEF), founded in 2009, is the largest Black and Latino grassroots progressive organization in Texas, with the capacity to engage in year-round community organizing and significantly grow the electorate. Their work is concentrated in the largest and fastest-growing counties of Harris, Fort Bend, Dallas, and Bexar, with the goal of transforming Texas into a state where working people of color have the power and representation they deserve.

Culture Concepts, LLC, is a strategic and creative consultancy that provides ethnographic research, cultural analysis, storytelling, and strategic messaging. The founder and principal, Cecilia Ballí, Ph.D., is a cultural anthropologist with an expertise in U.S.-Mexico border and Latino issues. The two other researchers and authors of the study are Michael Powell, Ph.D., a cultural anthropologist, and Betsabeth Monica Lugo, Ph.D., a sociologist.

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Executive Summary

Latinos in Texas represent a fast-growing demographic and community of voters. As soon as 2021, they are expected to become the largest ethnic group in the state. They make up 30 percent of the Texas electorate—about 5.6 million Latinos are currently eligible to vote—and for the first time this year, they're projected to be the second-largest share of eligible voters nationally, after Whites.

Yet in comparison with other groups, Latino voter turnout continues to lag.

Why?

Theories and misconceptions abound. This study seeks to offer better answers by allowing Latinos to explain things in their own words. Based on in-depth, one-on-one interviews with more than one hundred eligible voters in five major regions of the state, this research provides the first holistic look not just at why some Texas Latinos vote and others don't—but how they view and relate to government.

Unlike polls that categorize political perspectives through multiple-choice surveys, this study was built upon hundreds of hours of dialogue and careful listening. The insights provided by this approach have the potential to reframe how we understand and publicly discuss the political lives of Latinos. People can't always fully articulate why they don't vote, for example, but a more complete portrait comes into focus when we step back to explore their attitudes towards politics and representative government, and how these are shaped by their personal background and social and cultural experiences.

What emerges is a clearer picture that reveals the various gaps that keep Latinos from being better-incorporated and served by the political system—as well as the areas of opportunity for building a more active and engaged electorate. This picture defies some common stereotypes about Latino voters.

We began the study by investigating **what forces generate a Latino voter.** We discovered that Latinos who vote **feel empowered** and invested in the political system and have a **firm sense of belonging** on personal and social levels. They feel they have a right to be heard, they believe they can influence political outcomes, and they're able to directly relate government policy to their lives. They often interact with other voters or politically engaged individuals.

Conversely, **Latino nonvoters are not sure their vote matters,** they do not come from voting communities or backgrounds, and they do not feel that people in government or politicalcandidates and parties truly care about their experiences or perspectives. They tend to feel a **lower sense of belonging** in society and **less agency over their lives.** Contrary to popular myths, however, we did not find Latinos uninformed or apathetic about politics. Instead, the nonvoters we spoke with struggle to see a relationship between their political interests and the policies, campaigns, or behaviors of those in power.

We were reminded of the crucial fact that **voting is a social habit**—a practice that gets **developed over time and through the modeling of others.**

For various reasons explored in the report, it is a habit that has been established among Latinos far less than among Blacks and Whites. However, as social habits can be created, developed and shared, we found sources for optimism. Many Latinos we spoke with have become or are becoming part of emerging communities of voting in Texas. Looking deeper into political engagement, the study reveals a set of key takeaways, with implications for campaigns seeking to increase voting and civic engagement among Latinos:

- Supporting a political party is one factor that can drive voter turnout and civic engagement, but we did not discover a strong degree of partisanship among Latinos. **Partisan identification is delicate or weak,** even among people who regularly vote for or affiliate with one party. Instead, we would characterize "hybridity" as the more common approach to political values and ideology among a great many Texas Latinos. The report explores various reasons why most Latinos **don't strongly identify with Democrats or Republicans,** or with the labels "progressive," "conservative" or "moderate."

- **Latino political identity is complex,** slippery and strategic, rather than an innate identity. Texas Latinos relate strongly to their ethnic identity and cultural roots. But they identify with more specific ethnic or national-origin labels such as "Mexican American" and "Mexican" (Guatemalan, Puerto Rican, etc.)—and with the more conventional umbrella term "Hispanic"—than with "Latino," or, far less, "Latinx." Many of them **don't feel that there is a natural political affinity among all Latinos** that would translate to a collective ethnic politics or a singular "Latino Vote." While most of them have experienced discrimination or been made to feel different, they are not galvanized around a sense of shared history or political struggle, given a lack of public awareness about Latino history and racism.

- **Immigration** is a widely discussed and important issue for most Latinos, but **not the top issue that determines their voting behaviors** or level of political engagement. While they relate to it on a personal level, there is **not one unified view that aligns neatly with political ideologies.** Most Texas Latinos believe in the aspirational dream of immigration, and they also widely accept the premise of an immigration system that is regulated, with varying opinions about how the system should work and how much control there should be.

- Latinos understand and **engage more closely with national politics,** in comparison with local politics, which only regular voters pay attention to, usually once they have established homes and families. **State politics are very widely ignored,** and few know who represents them or understand the issues that are legislated at the state level.

- Latinos **recognize the 2020 presidential election as a potential turning point** for the future of the country. As a whole, Latinos are **remarkably pessimistic about the direction the country is going in,** in relation to issues such as health care and the economy, but also to what they perceive to be an environment of increasing conflict, hate and division.

- Latinos seek more **meaningful incorporation into a political system that sees them,** listens to them, and responds to their needs. They generally recognize that **they are not proportionally represented at all levels of government.** But seeking incorporation does not necessarily mean just electing more Latinos, as not all Latino politicians respond to them the same way. For various reasons, regions such as San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley, where there are significant numbers of Latinos in office today, face even higher levels of voter disengagement.

In a follow-up round of interviews after the COVID-19 pandemic began, we revisited a set of nonvoters and occasional voters to find out how recent events had impacted their lives and views of government. We found that:

- Latinos **recognize their vulnerability now**, perhaps more than ever. Their lives have been extraordinarily impacted by the pandemic, causing **deep concerns for their livelihoods.**

- COVID government responses have allowed Latinos to become better aware of the different levels of government, and they are deeply **frustrated with those responses not coordinating or aligning.**

- Generally, Latinos **do not feel confident in government** right now, much more so than before.

- Many, but not all, Latino nonvoters and occasional voters now say they **plan to vote in 2020.** The pandemic raised the stakes and allowed them to **better connect government actions directly to their lives.**

In conclusion, we discovered that the lack of enthusiasm for voting among many Texas Latinos is not the result of apathy or an uninformed populace. Rather, Latinos seek reciprocal engagement with politicians, political parties and campaigns that will allow them to better understand the weight of their vote and the direct effect of government policy on their lives. We found that the popular metaphor of the Latino electorate as a "sleeping giant" is vastly inadequate and misleading—Latino voters are not asleep, but instead **will continue to strengthen progressively as an electorate as voting habits grow and as the political system properly responds to them.**

Based on our findings, we strongly recommend engagement projects that prioritize **authentically listening to the political interests and everyday challenges of Latinos,** rather than imposing other people's presumptions, ideologies or narratives. Among the choices in politics today, Latinos do not see their voices and realities reflected.

Three Pillars of Voter Participation and Civic Engagement

After our data collection was completed, as we assessed the many factors that directly influence our interviewees' views of government and whether they vote, we were able to identify three major areas or "pillars" that fundamentally drive their engagement and participation. In short, this is our theory of voting and civic engagement. We feel strongly that any efforts to improve Latino political incorporation and turnout must simultaneously work to strengthen all three pillars.

1. Civic Empowerment and Belonging:

You envision yourself as an equal member of a larger political body and believe that your vote makes a difference. You feel entitled to make claims from your government and understand how its policies directly impact your life.

2. Voting Habits and Immersion in Voting Communities:

Through influence from your family or another politicization process, you develop a habit of voting regularly, so that it comes to feel like a responsibility and a natural part of what you do. You move in circles where others vote and talk about voting.

3. Responsive Government That Represents Your Interests:

The political system acknowledges you, speaks to you, and engages you. You see political candidates and officials advocate for issues you care about and enact policies that directly improve your life.

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Introduction

I. The Study

This study was born of the desire to better understand and grow the Texas Latino electorate. Despite fast population growth in Texas and nationally, Latinos remain frustratingly underrepresented, misunderstood, and unheard.

By 2021, Latinos are projected to become the largest ethnic group in the state.[1] They make up 30 percent of the Texas electorate, and for the first time this year, they're projected to become the second-largest share of eligible voters in the country, after Whites. Yet turnout continues to lag, proportionate to the share of Latino eligible voters. And Latino voices and needs remain absent from many local, state, and national political discussions.

Texas Organizing Project Educational Fund (TOPEF) commissioned this study in order to answer three specific and crucial questions: 1.) How do Latinos view their relationship with their government? 2.) What factors determine if a person votes or doesn't vote? 3.) Is there a path forward in having Latinos adequately represented in our electorate and democracy?

The perennial public narratives that attempt to explain Latino voter turnout are increasingly unsatisfactory. Theories and misconceptions abound and are reproduced countless times in the media and in a variety of other forums. Even Latino political leaders sometimes unwittingly advance these false notions.

This study takes a different approach to understanding the situation, seeking better answers by allowing Latinos to explain it in their own words. Based on in-depth, one-on-one interviews with more than one hundred eligible voters in five major regions of the state, this research provides the first holistic look not just at why some Texas Latinos vote and others don't—but also how they view and relate with government.

First, a foundational premise of this study is that only by talking and listening to Latinos describe their perspectives can we truly understand their political lives. To do so, we employed an ethnographic methodology, further explained below.

Second, we sought to look beyond the scope of voting alone, in order to understand political attitudes and behaviors from a holistic point of view. This required understanding Latinos within their broader social contexts, which included a range of relevant and overlapping experiences—such as family life, community, work, and school—as well as economic challenges and racial discrimination, to name just a few themes that emerged.

In taking this approach, we quickly learned that voting and political engagement are not necessarily the same thing. For example, many Latinos are well-informed about politics or even politically active in other ways, but for a variety of reasons, have not developed habits of voting.

We learned that voting is a social behavior, and needs to be studied as such. We also discovered that to engage the political system, you must believe that it sees you and hears you. Among many Texas Latinos, this is not the case.

This is a nonprofit research study. The research is guided by objective methodologies and an academic approach that is strictly nonpartisan. It does not explore or offer insights on specific political candidates or political parties. It does not attempt to predict election outcomes or trends. When our research collection methods touched on people's specific political choices, it was only to understand the motivating factors that guide individuals' political decision-making, and not to determine the favored candidates or parties of Latinos, as a whole.

This kind of knowledge can be used to promote voting and civic engagement among Latinos and to advance the principle of participation in our democracy. It can also be used by elected officials and voter advocates to really understand Latino voters and what they desire and expect from their government and their leaders.

TOPEF, founded in 2009, is the largest Black and Latino grassroots progressive organization in Texas, which works year-round to organize communities and significantly grow the electorate. Engaging in meaningful conversation with voters is central to TOPEF's mission and method. They launched this project because they genuinely wanted to listen to Latino voters—and hear about their needs, their challenges, their dreams.

This project was designed and executed by Culture Concepts, a Texas-based ethnographic research and storytelling consultancy. A highly experienced three-person team conducted the research, analysis, and writing. Cecilia Ballí, Ph.D., the founder and principal of Culture Concepts, is a cultural anthropologist, journalist, and writer. She is a recognized expert on Mexican-American border issues and Latino Studies. Betsabeth Monica Lugo, Ph.D., is a sociologist. Her research has focused on the ways that race, gender, class, and citizenship status intersect to shape the lived experience of Latino/a immigrants in the United States. And Michael Powell, Ph.D., is a cultural anthropologist with extensive experience as a researcher and consultant for a wide range of nonprofit and for-profit clients.

II. Methodology and Approach

This study employs an ethnographic approach, a social science research methodology developed to better understand individuals in their social and cultural contexts. Ethnography is a qualitative method which uses in-depth conversations and observational data gathering in order to create a nuanced description of lived reality.

This ethnographic approach makes this research unique from other political studies of Latinos, most of which are quantitative projects driven by data gathered from larger population surveys. Because voting and other political activities are also social behaviors, this ethnographic approach aims to provide a more expansive portrait of diverse views, attitudes, influences, behaviors, and social and cultural factors that help to drive voting and political engagement.

Ethnographic studies are like a "can opener" that can help us reframe and rethink our understanding of a challenging issue. In many cases, they help reveal overlooked dimensions of a problem or connect the dots between issues in ways that were not previously considered. Ethnography challenges us to think more deeply about what we are asking and doing, often generating further research avenues and opportunities for new program directions for real-world application.

Ethnographic methodology has been proven over decades to reveal unique insights. But the quality of this knowledge is somewhat different than what survey-based methods and quantitative studies offer. In short: This study is directionally correct, but not statistically significant. What that means is that it reveals the range of ideas within a population—in our case, Latino voters and nonvoters in Texas—but does not predict the prevalence of those ideas across the entire population.

Data collection consisted of interviews with 104 participants in five sites in Texas: the Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth, San Antonio, El Paso, and Rio Grande Valley metro regions. A roughly even distribution of demographic factors were represented in the group: gender, age groups, and income levels. We only interviewed Latino citizens who are eligible to vote, though we spoke with a balanced number of frequent voters, occasional voters, and nonvoters. In each interview site, we worked with recruiters to find Latinos reflecting a full range of political persuasions—not people who are part of the political class or actively involved in political organizations, but average people from many walks of life.

The majority of interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, and all were conducted one-on-one and face-to-face. Interviews took place between June and November 2019. Participants received $50 gift cards in appreciation for their time. The majority of the interviews were conducted in English, with some occurring completely in Spanish, and others in a mix of the two languages, depending on the participant's comfort level. Subsequently, a set of twenty follow-up interviews were conducted with nonvoters and occasional voters in the spring of 2020, after the COVID-19 pandemic had begun. These interviews were done over the phone. In both rounds, all interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

The interviews were broken up into six main conversation categories, with questions and prompts that would ensure that each interview hit on all of the same questions, while also allowing participants to explore issues that mattered most to them. An open-ended introduction section allowed researchers to begin understanding participants' lives and building rapport. The list below is a summary of what we explored in the interviews. A full copy of our interview guide is included in the report. (See Appendix, Sec. 2, Interview Guide.)

1. Voting Behaviors: Do you vote? Why or why not? What motivates you to vote the way you do? What do you think of the political parties?

2. Voting and Democracy: Does voting matter? Does your vote count? Why or why not?

3. Latinos and Voting: Do you identify yourself as Latino? What does that identity mean to you? How does your identity impact your voting and your political perspectives?

4. Cultures of Voting and Civic Engagement: How do family, friend, and community ties impact your voting habit? How do cultural practices and communications—whether mass media, family and friend networks, or some other medium—shape the way you learn about candidates, elections, and your decision-making process?

5. Candidates and Issues: Why do certain issues matter to you more than others? Why do certain types of candidates draw your interest?

6. The Future: Where do you see this country going? And what are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

People were given the option of remaining anonymous for the purpose of this report. Throughout the report, individuals whose names have been changed are marked with an asterisk (*). The majority of participants allowed us to use their identities.

We've chosen to employ the term "Latino" throughout the study because we wanted to use an umbrella term that is inclusive of individuals of varying ethnicities, and because it's the term most commonly used in political discussions today to refer to individuals of Latin American nationality or descent. However, within the study, we explore how this term does not have the same resonance for everyone, and is used less frequently than other identity labels that reference specific nationalities and ethnicities (e.g. Mexican or Mexican American). We have opted not to use the term "Latinx," despite the compelling public arguments for its use, because only a very tiny fraction of the participants understood the term or were using it to describe themselves.

The interview process was both personal and powerful. After just a handful of conversations, we quickly discovered that when discussing politics and policy with Latinos today, you very quickly get to the crux of their lives. There was laughter and tears, as well as a good deal of soul-searching. For many people, this was the first time anyone had asked them to articulate their political perspectives—or at the very least, the first time another person had taken the time to seriously engage them, take notes, and authentically listen to what they had to say. Truly, it is the emotional and intellectual labor of ethnographic methodology—and the dedication and commitment by both interviewer and interviewee in these intense conversations—that points the way to uncommon insights and valuable new truths.

III. Roadmap of the Report

This report consists of six main parts that collectively paint the picture of Latino political life. These sections take us from an expansive social context perspective—the scene from above—all the way to the individualized stories—the view from the ground.

A statistics-based context chapter provides a framework for the Latino voter population in Texas and nationally, including the size of the electorate, voter turnout trends, and how those trends compare with other states and other demographic groups.

This is followed by the most important section of the study: A set of ten Key Insights based on our original research. Each insight is organized around our findings and analysis and is supplemented by direct quotations from the Latinos we interviewed. Some are also followed by a brief set of implications

suggested by the research, that can inform further investigation or future civic engagement projects.

Following the Key Insights are three sections that complement the main ideas of the study. This includes a further set of findings based on the additional interviews we conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. After that is a loosely organized set of additional findings and relevant topics that emerged in our original interviews, but weren't part of the ten Key Insights. And finally, we offer a brief set of sample biographies to shed light on the fuller testimonies we heard from Latinos, revealing some of their personal journeys, their motivations for voting or not voting, and their views of political leaders and government. Here we let people tell their story, in their own words, as much as possible.

IV. The Three Pillars of Voter Participation and Civic Engagement

In the course of our analysis, three organizing ideas emerged to help us make sense of the research data and explain the motivating factors behind Latino voter participation and civic engagement more broadly. We employed these three pillars to guide our thinking, because these organizing ideas reflect intersecting layers of analysis, on and between macro- and micro-scales of society and the individual. Each person we interviewed touched on these three layers in some way, and in doing so, helped us develop a deeper understanding of these phenomena, and how they each contribute to determining whether a person turns out to vote and is interested in engaging the political system more broadly. In short, this is our theory of voting and civic engagement.

1. Civic Empowerment and Belonging

Civically engaged Latinos see themselves as equal members of a larger political body and believe that their vote makes a difference. They feel entitled to make claims from their government and understand how its policies directly impact their life and the lives of those around them. They feel a sense of ownership of government, and a sense of belonging to this envisioned political community.

This Pillar is found in the realm of individual experience, personal agency, and emotional reaction. But to be clear, this is not simply an individual psychological response, but rather describes how an individual is embedded in and shaped by broader social, political, and cultural experiences. By implication, we discovered that Latinos often don't feel empowerment and belonging in political or civic spheres because they don't feel them in other areas of their lives, either.

2. Voting Habits and Immersion in Voting Communities

Through influence from family, peers, or other politicization processes, civically engaged Latinos develop a habit of voting regularly, so that it comes to feel like a responsibility and/or a natural part of what they do. They move in circles where others vote and talk about voting.

This Pillar points to the habits around voting and political-minded conversation that happen when individuals participate in collective and social behaviors. Voting is a social behavior, as is engaging in dialogue about politics with others in a community. This Pillar helps us recognize how communities can powerfully work together to promote voting and political engagement. Many different actors can play a role in this social process, including individuals, family, and friend

networks, as well as educational, cultural, and even religious institutions. While political parties or candidate campaigns may play a part in this process, they are not the sole or even necessarily the main driver of developing voting habits.

3. A Responsive Government That Represents Your Interests

Civically engaged Latinos believe the political system acknowledges them, hears them, and engages them. They see political candidates and officials advocating for issues they care about and enact policies with the potential to directly improve their lives.

Of course, a completely responsive government is an aspirational goal, which exists in what is called a shared cultural imagination. Even the most empowered voters feel they cannot demand the government system behave exactly as they wish it to. But they nonetheless can envision how this layer might work. It is this common understanding of and realistic aspiration for how government might serve their needs that plays an important role in people's openness to vote or engage politically. People who believe that our nation is continually striving toward a more responsive government are also more likely to participate. Unfortunately, to a large degree, political candidates, party leaders, and elected officials have disregarded Latino voters, making it difficult for some Latinos to imagine themselves as engaged players whom the system sees and validates.

In determining how to translate these Three Pillars into practice, our research suggests that institutions or organizations hoping to improve Latino civic engagement and voter participation need to work on all Three Pillars together. However, different actors may play different roles in each of these areas. And not all Three Pillars have to be perfectly achieved to inspire individuals to vote. For instance, someone may decide to vote as a result of developing a voting habit alone.

The Three Pillars feed off and reinforce each other. Addressing the larger problem from all three sides appears to be the best strategy for building the most robust, full-proof system to promote Latino political empowerment and engagement.

Endnotes

1 Alexa Ura and Anna Novak, "Texas' Hispanic Population Grew By 2 Million In The Past Decade, On Pace To Be Largest Share Of State By 2021," The Texas Tribune, June 25, 2020, https://www.texastribune.org/2020/06/25/texas-hispanic-population-grows-2-million/

Chapter 1: How Latinos Count

DEMOGRAPHICS AND VOTING TRENDS IN TEXAS AND NATIONALLY

Latinos are the largest non-White ethnic group in Texas, as well as in the United States. And in the 2020 elections, based on forecasts, they are also expected to become the largest non-White voting group in the country for the first time. With approximately 32 million projected eligible Latino voters, they will account for 13.3% of all eligible voters nationally.[1]

This chapter examines demographics and statistics, with an emphasis on Texas Latinos and their voting trends, in order to provide context for this qualitative study. Here we have gathered relevant statistics from authoritative sources in order to explain the current and future trajectory of Latinos as a population and as a voting group.

A note on identifiers: The U.S. Census Bureau and many others use the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" interchangeably. In this report, we use Latino in all instances, except when quoting sources.

National Demographics

Latinos have become the largest non-White ethnic group in the country. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are just over 328 million Americans as of July 1, 2019.[2] Of those, 18.3 percent—just over 60 million Americans—are Latino. By comparison, 13.4 percent of the population is Black or African-American, 5.9 percent is Asian American, and 60.4 percent is White.

Latinos have been the largest U.S. ethnic minority group for well over a decade. It was January 2003 when the New York Times reported that the Latino population had reached 37 million people, surpassing Blacks as the largest ethnic or racial minority group in the nation.[3]

Latinos' role as the largest non-White demographic has been the result of a dramatic population growth pattern, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. Since 1960, the nation's Latino population has increased nearly tenfold, from 6.3 million to more than 60 million Latinos today. And those numbers are expected to continue growing, with the Pew Research Center projecting the nation's Latino population to rise to 107 million by the year 2065.[4]

In the course of this growth, the percentage share of the Latino population in the United States has also been steadily rising. In 1960, Latinos made up just 3.5 percent of the total population. But by 2019, that figure had grown to 18.3 percent. By 2065, according to Pew Research Center projections, Latinos are expected to account for 24 percent of the total population.[5]

However, Latino population growth has slowed in recent years.[6] From 2005 to 2010, the annual growth was 3.4 percent per year, but has declined to 2.0 percent annual growth since. Still, Latino growth outpaces that of other racial or ethnic groups in the country. For example, the nation's White population saw negligible growth between 2015 and 2018, and the Black population's annual growth was less than 1 percent.

The Latino population is relatively young nationwide.[7,8,9] In 2018, the national median age for Americans was 38 years old, while the median age of Latinos was 30 years old. That median age has increased from 27 years old in 2010, but is still significantly younger than the rest of the nation. By comparison, in 2018, Whites had the highest median age nationally, at 44 years old; the Asian-American median age was 37 years old; and Blacks' median age was 34. Today, 32 percent of all Latinos are under 18 years old, and U.S.-born Latinos are younger still, with 45 percent of them younger than 18 years old.

Some Texas Demographic History

In Texas, the story of the Latino population is somewhat different, because Latinos constitute a much larger percentage of the total state population.

According to U.S. Census data[10], there are nearly 29 million Texans as of 2019. Of those, 39.6 percent are Latino, or almost 11.5 million people. By comparison, 41.5 percent of the Texas population is White and 12.8 percent is Black or African American.

According to historian Terry Jordan[11], when Mexican political authority in Texas ended at San Jacinto in 1836, with the conclusion of the Texas Revolution, "no more than 7,000 or 8,000 Spaniards, Christianized Indians, and mestizos resided in Texas." In comparison, by 1850, the state's White population was 141,000. In a sense then, Mexican-Texans had already been a minority group in their own homeland, due to heavy immigration from the United States into Texas before it ceded from Mexico—much of it illegal, according to Jordan.[12]

In Texas, it was not until sometime in the late 1940s that Latinos surpassed Blacks to become the largest ethnic minority group. [13] At that time, each group accounted for 13 percent of the total population.

Due to steady population growth, particularly among Latinos, in 2005, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that Texas had become the newest "majority minority" state, joining Hawaii, New Mexico, California and Washington D.C.[14] According to population estimates from the previous year, the Texas minority population had reached 11.3 million—or 50.2 percent of its total population.

Based on current population and growth estimates, the Texas state demographer and the U.S. Census Bureau expect that Latinos will become the largest ethnic group in Texas by 2022.[15,16] More recent reports suggest that Latinos will become the largest group even earlier, by mid-2021.[17]

Latinos and Voting Nationwide

In this section, we run through Latino voting statistics at a national level. This will be followed by a look at Latino voting statistics in Texas.

Again, based on demographic growth forecasts, Latinos are expected to be the largest non-White eligible voting group in the country for the first time in the 2020 elections.[18] With approximately 32 million projected eligible Latino voters,

they will account for 13.3 percent of all eligible voters. An "eligible voter" includes all U.S. citizens 18 years or older who could potentially cast a vote, whether they are registered or not.

The number of Latino eligible voters is still far below the 60 million Latinos who live in the country.[19] Only about half of the nation's Latinos are eligible to vote, the smallest share of any ethnic group in the country. There are a couple of reasons for this. About 18.6 million Latinos are under 18 years old, and therefore too young to vote. In addition, about 11.3 million Latinos are non-citizen adults.

Latino share of eligible voters varies greatly by state.[20] For example, while 71 percent of Maine's Latino population and 68 percent of Montana's Latino population are eligible to vote, states with larger numbers of Latinos have much lower eligibility rates—such as Florida, at 56 percent; California, at 51 percent; and Texas, at 50 percent. The two states with the lowest shares of eligible Latino voters are North Carolina, at 34 percent; and Tennessee, at 33 percent. In terms of hard numbers, after California's 7.9 million eligible Latino voters, Texas comes in second, with 5.6 million eligible Latino voters.

Nationally, Latino voter turnout rates in general elections have been lower than for other groups.[21] That includes the 2018 midterm elections, when Latino turnout surged, but still remained relatively low. In the 2016 presidential election, the national Latino turnout rate was lower than all ethnic groups—47.6 percent of eligible voters, compared with 49.3 percent of Asian Americans, 59.6 percent of Blacks, and 65.3 percent of Whites.

Interestingly, nationwide turnout among naturalized Latino citizens has been higher than U.S.-born Latinos.[22] In the 2016 presidential elections, for example, the turnout among naturalized citizens was 53.4 percent—higher than the 45.5 percent turnout for U.S.-born Latinos. And the same phenomenon was true for turnout among Asian Americans: naturalized citizens turned out at 51.9 percent, compared with 44.9 percent for U.S.-born voters.

Latinos and Voting in Texas

Latino voter turnout in Texas is clearly smaller in comparison to other population groups in the state. This is partly because Latinos are disproportionately young and non-citizens compared with other groups. But the reasons for lower Latino voter turnout cannot be fully explained by these statistics, and this is the main research question explored in this study. However, these statistics are important for providing context for further discussion and analysis.

A simple comparison of the share of total populations who are voting is revealing. This "total population" number includes all members of a demographic, including those who are too young to vote or who are not eligible citizens. In the 2016 presidential election, 28 percent of all Texas Latinos voted.[23] That compares with 47.7 percent of all Texans, and 47.8 percent of White Texans. Because presidential elections typically yield the highest voter turnout, this is a good standard to examine the highest levels of voter turnout for all groups. However, these numbers alone don't tell the whole story—since a larger share of Latinos are not eligible to vote than among other demographic groups.

But let's take this step by step, examining the voting numbers and percentages from a broad statistical view, and then considering some finer points to fully appreciate how many Latinos who are eligible to vote are not turning out, versus those who are.

According to the Texas Secretary of State, as of November 2019, 73.9 percent of the state's Voting Age Population (VAP) is registered to vote.[24] The Secretary counts nearly 16 million registered voters out of a total VAP of 21.6 million eligible voters.

A smaller percentage of the overall Latino population in Texas is registered to vote, in comparison with other ethnic groups. This is partly because Latinos have a higher share of ineligible voters—noncitizens, and people under 18 years old. Based on statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau[25] during the presidential election of 2016, 38.3 percent of the total Latino population in Texas was registered to vote—again, a share that takes into account non-citizen Latinos (31 percent of Latinos) and those under 18 years old (33 percent of Latinos). By comparison, 58.1 percent of all Texans were eligible to vote; 71.6 percent of all Whites were eligible; and 69.4 percent of all Blacks were eligible.

Of Latinos who are actually eligible to vote, just over half of this group, or 55 percent, actually registered to vote in Texas for the 2016 elections. That compares with 67.5 percent of all eligible Texans; 72.7 percent of all eligible Whites; and 73.1 percent of all eligible Blacks.[26] Simply put, voter registration is lower among Latinos than it is among any other ethnic group.

Finally, taking this to the final leg of the journey, only 40.5 percent of eligible Latinos actually voted in the 2016 election. That compares with 55.4 percent of all Texans, 62.9 percent of Whites, and 57.2 percent of Blacks.[27]

Seen another way, 73 percent of registered Latino voters actually turned out to vote. That compares with 87 percent of registered White voters, and 78% of registered Black voters.[28] These two sets of figures allow for a better comparison of Latino voter turnout vis-à-vis other ethnic groups. The gap is not as big as when one compares turnout against the entire population of each group—but Latino voter registration and turnout still lag significantly.

The share of Latino eligible voters in Texas is only going to grow. As of 2018, half of all Texans under 18 years old are Latinos. With 25.8 percent of the state's total population under 18 years old (approximately 7.5 million people), that means that around 3.75 million young Latinos will become eligible to vote in coming years.[29]

Conclusion

The statistical realities of Latino voting outlined here paint a concerning picture of a large and growing population group that is not voting in comparable ratios to other demographic groups. But what these numbers alone fail to do is adequately explain the reasons why this is the case.

In the next sections of this study, we outline many of the social experiences and emotional realities of Latino political life that can offer a more holistic picture of what is happening. This research and analysis provides insights beyond the statistics, and can hopefully guide more equitable future outcomes.

As the Latino population expands in Texas and nationally, it's critical that voter turnout continues to increase as well, in order for us to have a truly representative democracy that speaks to the interests of all Americans, including Latinos.

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Chapter 2: Ten Key Findings

1. VOTING AS EMPOWERMENT AND BELONGING

Why do some Latinos vote? Or, what makes a Latino voter? These questions lie at the heart of this study. Unfortunately, there is no single or simple answer. Based on our interviews, we discovered a complex and multi-layered answer with a wide range of implications. Here, we disentangle the overlapping possible pathways to the creation of Latino voters, based on how they speak and the stories they told us about how and why they became voters. Two strong themes emerged in our analysis of the many reasons driving voter participation: empowerment and belonging. These crucial factors seem to coalesce in determining who ultimately ends up at the polling place and who stays home, and here, we explore the different ways these socioemotional states manifest among regular and occasional voters. In the following section, we will explore the opposite: why other Latinos don't vote.

To begin with, Latino voters feel empowered. By empowerment, we refer to ways that individuals feel about themselves—as people who make a genuine difference in the world and have the autonomy to make their own decisions. That empowerment doesn't just come from within; it's not something people are simply born with. Instead, we found empowerment emerging from and cultivated by people's social environments: family life, community, work, school, and other social and cultural institutions. The social sense of empowerment then translates to civic empowerment.

Latino voters also feel a sense of belonging. By belonging, we refer to the ways that individuals feel about how their personhood and identity is accepted, or not, in their social environments. That includes multiple levels of social environment, from their friends and family, to peer networks, to their local community. It also extends to how they imagine being part of their city, state and country. Belonging, on a more personalized level, typically manifests in obvious ways: people are acknowledged, listened to and responded to. But belonging on a broader level is often more symbolic. For example, people who feel they belong tend to believe that the government does, can, or should do things for them; that they are or could be represented in the government.

While structural barriers may hinder voting access or make voting a challenge, we did not find voters who regarded these challenges as insurmountable—many other everyday life tasks are similarly challenging, but recognized as obviously necessary. Instead, we found that these socioemotional levels of empowerment and belonging cannot be discounted for understanding voting tendencies among Latinos.

In fact, they are the predictive factor. They are the building blocks that make voting, and political engagement more broadly, feel more obvious, intuitive, and natural to the individual. For those who feel it, it's like the air they breathe—voting is just what they do.

INSIGHT:

Latino voters have a strong sense of empowerment and belonging. They feel they have a right to be heard, they believe they can influence political outcomes, and they're able to directly relate government policy to their lives.

Pathways to Becoming Voters

The decision to vote and the broader meaning of voting seems to change over time, and, for many people, may only develop over the course of their life, as they establish stronger senses of empowerment and belonging. Some voters first learn this at home, from their family—tellingly, none of the nonvoters we spoke with grew up seeing their parents vote. (See Chapter 2, Section 3, Voting as a Social Habit.) Other people develop the tendency to vote in school, particularly in their college years. For them, political awareness comes from coursework, engagement with peers, and/or extracurricular and community involvement. Still others become voters when they begin to raise a family and make roots in their communities, developing a stronger sense of local ownership and belonging. And others encounter politicization processes and encouragement to vote in their workplace, church, or through community centers or political organizations.

One voter in Dallas recounted the emotional story of how she learned to vote, and the deep remorse she felt for not doing so sooner: "I regret not voting . . . I feel bad now. It makes me feel bad and embarrassed that I haven't voted . . . I feel that it's ignorance in the way I was raised. The reason why I haven't voted was because I was always raised, like, 'It doesn't matter if you vote. It doesn't matter if you speak up, because they're never going to listen to you. You're a minority, they're always going to see you as less' . . . Now, that I'm older, I'm like, no, that's not good enough. I have kids of my own, I have to teach them to do better and pave their own way. I have to set that example." [Veronica Vazquez, 35, No Affiliation, Dallas]

> *"You just have to do it [vote]. Because you can go talking to your family or to your friends, and you can tell them what you don't like about the government or what you have, your community. If you're not voting, your voice is not being heard."*
>
> Jeniffer Saldaña Villegas 21, Democrat, El Paso

Government's Impact Recognized

In sharp contrast to nonvoters, regular voters have a sense of how government affects their lives. For them, voting is important because they realize the impact that government policies have on them, their family, and their community. Some Latinos we spoke with became voters when they experienced specific, critical life events that allowed them to better make a connection between government decisions and their day-to-day challenges—such as sudden unemployment, a health crisis, or an encounter with the criminal justice or immigration systems. One voter described an especially trying time, and the motivation that arose when she realized the government would not help her: "The reason why I even got into voting is because I was really struggling a lot. Like, I had only $300 in my bank account and I went to apply for food stamps and . . . they denied me . . . I was just, like, 'Who the heck is in charge of this? How can I vote? How can I make my opinions heard?'" [Mary Uribe, 26, Independent, San Antonio]

Voting Matters

For many voters, voting is important not because of who is in power, or because they hate or love who occupies the White House or Governor's Mansion. The most regular voters can accept if their candidate or party doesn't win. As one voter put it, "We're not always going to win. You know, you can't always win. You win some, you lose some, but that doesn't mean that we're going to stop trying." [Lisa Perez*, 31, Democrat, Houston]

These voters believe in the democratic election system, at least enough to believe that their vote can spur a change to happen within the system. Some talked about this belief being reinforced when Barack Obama won, affirming that a non-white person could be elected president, or when Beto O'Rourke nearly won the 2018 Senate race, affirming that a Democrat might have the chance to be elected to a statewide office (again) in Texas. Regular voters, while often critical of the political system, feel that it is legitimate and basically fair. Or, as one voter explained, "Unfortunately, we're in a situation where you have to trust the system, because we're living by that system. If we don't trust that system, then everything truly falls apart." [Benito Moriel, 33, Democrat, Dallas] For these individuals, if their candidate doesn't win, it's not because of corruption or flagrant unfairness in the vote count (though some did have strong critiques of the Electoral College).

Voters believe that a vote is a vote—one vote counts, and can, in certain elections, actually tip the scales and make the difference between a win or loss.

Voting Changes Things

Regular voters also feel that voting is about change. Many recognize a need for change to happen, and they believe that change is possible, particularly through voting. These voters get more enthusiastic as they see change happening; for example, when new representatives or politicians come to power, new legislation is passed, or new rules are enacted. One voter said that voting is important because, "it can change our policy issues, what our troops are doing, where all our weapons are, where resources are going to, abortion policy and healthcare, education. It changes everything . . . I think people don't understand . . . People don't understand

that everything we do is because of a vote that was passed. Everything we do is policy oriented." [Andrea Danielle Mata, 20, Independent, El Paso]

Engaged Understanding

Regular voters are engaged in politics in a variety of different ways. They are typically surrounded in their lives by other voters and people who discuss politics. They feel like they have developed a solid, or solid enough understanding of politics and government to be informed to vote, even if they do not know all of the candidates running for office. Conversely, many nonvoters do not understand the specifics of voting and political offices, and felt that they should not be voting if they don't know most of the candidates on the ballot. (See Chapter 2, Section 2, Nonvoter Views and Beliefs.)

Sense of Community Ownership

Many voters take or want to take more responsibility for their community. They see voting not just as a personal responsibility, but as a broader responsibility to the people they share a physical and social environment with. Just as they don't want to solely rely on government to make life better, they feel a need to assert themselves in the system for their own good and the greater good. And voting is one way they can do so.

Duty-Bound

Some regular voters feel a strong duty to vote. In many cases, it is tied intimately to their identity. These individuals feel that voting is a responsibility that comes with citizenship, which gives them a sense of belonging in this nation. These voters expressed gratitude for the privilege to vote, and were grateful more broadly for this country and this democracy. One voter tied his voting to a sense of patriotic duty derived from his family history: "My grandfather was in World War II, my Dad's dad was in Korea, my Dad served, I have uncles that served, I have a cousin that serves. It's out of that duty. You want to support the country, and you want to say how great this country is, and then you don't vote? It's like you're going to slap them in the face." [Enrique Carbajal, 34, Republican, Houston]

Other voters highlighted the historical struggle for the right to vote, or the sacrifices that others have made to allow them to vote. One voter said, "There was a time when Black people couldn't vote, there was a time when Brown people couldn't vote, or women couldn't vote. Now I'm older, so I'm like, 'I'm not going to take it for granted.'" [Jessica Cordero, 34, Democrat, San Antonio] Similarly, another voter said, "It is important [to vote]. I think that given the fact that women weren't allowed to vote and people of color weren't allowed to vote, I feel like I have an obligation to people that came before me who fought for this right." [Jaime Bailey, 34, No Affiliation, El Paso] However, this was not a widespread narrative among most or even many of the study participants. (See Chapter 2, Section 5, Ethnicity, Identity and the Latino Vote.)

Voting to Empower Latinos

Some Latino voters feel that voting is one way to empower Latinos, specifically. For example, one voter talked about the need for Latinos to push back against discrimination and demand equity, and saw voting as the pathway: "I think the fact that you're Hispanic and they see you, like I've always said, they see you less than. I had accepted that, and I don't accept that anymore.

You're either going to treat me as equal, or we're going to have a problem." [Veronica Vazquez, 35, No Affiliation, Dallas]

Similarly, another voter said: "Well, I have to vote. I have to do something to protect my people because they're [government and elected officials] not going to protect me. They're not going to do what's right for me. They're going to do what's right for them." [Ixchel Perez-Sajquim, 24, Independent, El Paso]

Making Their Voices Heard

Beyond promoting specific political or policy changes, voters believe they're making a difference in a larger sense, by asserting themselves. They feel like they're making their voice heard. They talk about voting as an act of voice, of voicing an opinion. In that sense, voting is a statement about who exists, who is visible, and who matters in this democracy.

One voter articulated this point about his empowerment and what's at stake in voting in eloquent terms: "Voting just makes you feel like, my voice is going to count. My vote is going to be the difference between one to none. What if that one person, it was only one vote that mattered to win? What if it was my vote that didn't count? What if that one vote, just one, can change everything? . . . It's like saying, as a Latino, that one voice is going to be heard." [Ryan Elizalde, 38, Democrat, Houston]

> *"I still believe that my vote probably doesn't make a huge difference as one person. But I do believe that just voting gives you the right to have this conversation. Because not voting, I can't really be, like, 'Trump this.' I can't sit here and have an opinion if I'm not doing anything about it."*
>
> Samanta Lizet Quiroz, 29,
> No Affiliation, Rio Grande Valley

Implications

Telling Stories About How Change Happens

Even the most disenfranchised people can develop an ability to make claims, particularly if they can see and experience change in the world, often beginning in their immediate surroundings. Bringing about tangible change—for example, through grassroots work or community activism—was empowering to several people we interviewed who had joined political organizations, including Texas Organizing Project. One voter said, "I started realizing that all these things that

we were fighting for, that I was going out there and knocking on doors for, were things that I really needed to fight for myself . . . You just have to start doing little . . . having your own private little meetings in your neighborhoods. Get your neighborhood together and start doing little changes in your own neighborhood. Get some petitions started depending on what are the issues in your neighborhood." [Lisa Perez*, 31, Democrat, Houston]

This includes gathering people to participate in the change—when done as a collective endeavor, the experience can be even more empowering. It should also include communicating and promoting that work and its outcomes, both to new audiences and to those who participated in the campaigns. Seeing, reading about, learning about, and experiencing change is empowering. When people genuinely believe that change is possible, it gives them a sense of agency that can create pathways to voting.

Recognizing How Government Affects Our Lives

Interacting with public and government institutions is also an opportunity for empowerment. While not all encounters with a city council or county commission may yield a positive outcome, they can have a very powerful effect on people's understanding of how government policy is made and impacts their lives. Helping Latinos connect the dots between their life experiences and government—even without recommending to them how changes could or should happen—is a crucial pathway to voting. Organizations working to build the electorate should develop persuasive ways to show these connections and also help people make these connections for themselves.

Broader Pathways to Empower and Develop Belonging

Organizations and institutions invested in increasing Latino voter participation need to develop broader pathways to help cement a sense of belonging and empowerment among Latinos. This is a longer-term, multi-faceted project that is rich with many different opportunities in which diverse actors can play a role. For example, getting people to know their rights, and separating fact from fiction about what they should expect from government can lead. to stronger feelings of entitlement. The goal is to get Latinos to fundamentally believe that as citizens who vote and pay taxes, the government should work for them. Getting political parties and candidates to specifically address various Latino realities and issues beyond immigration—the one policy issue commonly associated with Latinos—is also a critical way of developing a sense of political belonging. Another way to create empowerment is to develop public narratives and share histories about how different groups of people, including Latinos, gained equal rights and the right to vote. This can help remind Latinos that it wasn't always this way, highlighting the privilege and weight of their vote. And finally, many educational and even cultural and arts institutions can play an important role in nurturing personal and social belonging for Latinos, which directly leads to empowerment in various forms, including civic empowerment.

In short, we should all be imagining new ways that we can increase the shared sense that Latinos are equal and valuable members of our society and political system, who deserve to be seen, heard and represented.

> *"They're my kiddos, they're going to have so much power at their hands. They're going to have a voice. They have a voice. They need to know that they do. They need to recognize that, and it's my job to teach them. I think maybe that's what people haven't been taught."*
>
> Karla Marlen Cantu Torres, 45, Democrat, Houston

2. NONVOTER VIEWS AND BELIEFS

Why do some Latinos not vote? The answer to this question is equally, or perhaps more valuable than apprehending why Latinos vote. Understanding both sides of the voting divide can help spur change, inspiring ideas for transforming nonvoters into voters and getting Latinos more civically and politically engaged. Similar to our experience with voters, we discovered a complex and multi-layered set of answers explaining why many Latinos don't vote, with a wide range of implications. Here we offer overarching findings as well as an inventory of challenges or impediments to voting.

Latino nonvoters reflect the inverse of what makes a voter. If voters are empowered and feel a sense of social belonging, nonvoters are in shorter supplies of both these qualities. In terms of empowerment, nonvoters often don't feel that their vote matters, and they express this in a variety of ways, from questioning election systems to feeling lack of control over political outcomes. At the same time, nonvoters generally don't believe people in government care about their vote or their perspective. This lack of belonging is expressed through a disconnect between their votes and actual government policies, as well as their implementation at all levels of government. It is also an outcome of racism and discrimination, often experienced by Latinos as an explicit rejection of their belonging to this nation.

We feel strongly after this study that the popular perception that Latino nonvoters are apathetic is wholly inaccurate. In our interviews, we did not hear most people say that they don't care about politics or the workings of the government, generally. In fact, we discovered that almost all of the nonvoters we interviewed were following political news to some degree, and often had strong opinions. However, we discovered that nonvoters are not politically engaged. By engagement, we refer to a sense of attachment and relationship to politics and government, whether real, virtual, and/or imagined. Whereas engaged voters experience the workings of government in some or mostly positive ways, and imagine themselves as part of an ongoing public discussion with and about government, and about government policy and direction, nonvoters simply don't feel they are part of these debates. Some of them fear or avoid government authority in all of its manifestations. This lack of engagement is less about the workings of individual psychology or experience, and instead points to a problem with the collective relationships between people and their political environment.

> *"To be honest with you, I just don't have the time. I'm in a place where I'm right in the middle of where I'm at. I can either go south, [or] I can head up north. I'm trying to go north. I'm trying to succeed, I'm trying to get money . . . so I don't have to worry about anything."*
>
> Fernando Morales, 28,
> No Affiliation, San Antonio

INSIGHT:

Nonvoters don't feel that their vote matters or that political leaders care about their experiences or perspectives. They're not convinced they can influence political outcomes and have difficulty relating the workings of government to their lives. They have a lower sense of social belonging and less agency over their lives.

Access Is Not the Issue

Access to voting, and actually getting to polling stations, is not a primary problem for nonvoters. While some nonvoters talked about various issues of access, upon further conversation it was clearly revealed that other, deeper issues were at play that prevented them from voting. For example, one nonvoter rationalized his decision not to vote by stating that, "We had passed by one poll . . . and there's a huge line, and I was like, 'Well, I don't like waiting in lines.'" But later, when prompted further, he explained his deeper frustration with voting: "I feel like it's not going to matter, my vote is not going to matter. That's what I feel like. Because it's just one vote. I don't think one vote is going to make a difference." [Jon Leal, 33, No Affiliation, Dallas] When people do not have a conviction that their vote is important and can influence outcomes, they are more likely to be dissuaded by secondary impediments such as long waits, scheduling conflicts, or onerous voting processes. By contrast, a person determined to vote will find ways to overcome or endure these challenges. This is not to say that voting should not be made easier and more accessible to improve voter turnout. But a conviction to vote must also be present and nurtured, since this serves as the driving force above voting accessibility.

Not Clearly Making a Difference

Nonvoters often do not see or know how their vote will make a difference. Many struggled to imagine how their individual opinion might be shared among a larger audience or community, whether as Latinos or any other voting bloc. Nonvoters fail to see how a collection of individuals could come together to create substantive change. As one nonvoter explained it, "It's just one vote. I don't know how one vote is going to make a difference." [Jesus C. Mendoza, 23, Independent, San Antonio]

This discourse that one vote is not likely to make a difference was exceedingly common among nonvoters, and one of them even pleaded to be convinced of the opposite. He expressed a deep desire to be a part of something bigger and feel more agency over political outcomes: "I just feel like, I would love to see why we make changes. Why our vote matters. I want to be seeing, as far as a presentation, sit down and I want them to convince me, why is it great to vote. Because at this point, I don't know why it's great to vote . . . That's the thing, I love reading about it [politics],

I love watching it. But I just don't see, I haven't been convinced to actually go out there and do it, and vote . . . And once I get that convincing, once they convince me and show me the proper ways to go approach these things, then I'll be out there voting." He summarized: "I want my voice to be heard, but at the same time, I want to be able to get that security that we do make a change, we do make a difference." [Peter Anthony Guzman, 28, Democrat, San Antonio]

Out of Their Control

Nonvoters often feel frustrated that the election process, and politics generally, is something that feels out of their control. Because they don't feel any control over the outcome, this leads many of them to question: What's the point of voting, or of any other form of political engagement? Instead, they talk about focusing their finite energy and resources on things they can control, like work, financial livelihood, and family.

As one nonvoter explained, they have other life events they feel more comfortable dealing with: "I'm fine watching the news in the morning. I hear about voting and stuff on the news whenever it happens, but it doesn't make me want to go jump out and vote though . . . I hear it and that's it . . . I just have my own life doing other stuff." [Jon Leal, 33, No Affiliation, Dallas]

Informed, but Not Engaged

Latino nonvoters generally follow current events through the news media and are relatively well informed, frequently keeping up-to-date about events affecting their local community. Many follow political news on a daily basis. In other words, they defy the stigma of "low information" voters. Information access or lack of education do not seem to be their main obstacles.

At the same time, while nonvoters are largely informed through media about the political state of affairs, they often lack information about how government works and how government policies impact their life and those around them. This suggests that political media is failing to adequately describe the actual workings of the government, instead tending to focus on more captivating storylines, especially political battles. It also suggests that many nonvoters don't see themselves as part of these political stories—stories they follow but do not necessarily feel implicated by. As one well-educated and well-informed nonvoter explained, reflecting on the political processes she read about in the media: "I feel that when you don't have money and when you don't have power, you don't really make those kinds of decisions." [Jamie Martinez, 31, No Affiliation, San Antonio]

Misunderstanding How Government Works

Specifically, some nonvoters talked about their lack of knowledge about government offices, candidates, and parties. There is often little understanding about what each of these elected officials actually do, in terms of policy and government operations. Nonvoters and voters alike expressed a desire to have nonpartisan information they could access to learn about the offices up for vote in any given election and the candidates vying for them. This confusion over different offices and a lack of familiarity with candidates keeps many nonvoters away from the polls, concerned that they don't know enough or even that they could vote for someone or something that could negatively affect them. There is also a feeling of apprehension among nonvoters, as a result, because they don't know

how voting outcomes might affect them, possibly in unexpected ways. For example, one nonvoter stated that he didn't know, "what's safe for me to vote for." [Carlos Ortiz, 31, Democrat, Houston]

Rigged System

Other nonvoters question whether and how the voting system is failing us, such as how the most popular candidates don't necessarily win, or how some candidates can seemingly "buy" an election. The most recent and often-cited example of this was the 2016 presidential election, when Hillary Clinton won the popular vote but Donald Trump took the Electoral College. One nonvoter said, "You saw what the people voted for . . . Hillary, and then the electoral vote was for Donald . . . Do our people's votes really count?" [Fernando Morales, 28, No Affiliation, San Antonio] Some nonvoters struggle to believe that anyone is actually counting their votes. The same nonvoter continued: "When we vote for the presidency and stuff like that, I feel like it's just picked among the government or higher power in the office . . . I don't think our votes really count towards the election." [Theresa Dominguez, 27, No Affiliation, Houston] This view that someone else or some other force might ultimately decide an election adds to their sense of disempowerment and reinforces their belief that their vote alone will not change outcomes.

Family and Community Influencers

Family upbringing and community environment matter enormously for voting. (For a fuller discussion, see Chapter 2, Section 3, Voting as a Social Habit.) Nonvoters were not raised in families or community contexts where voting was common. As one nonvoter who was ready to become a voter explained, "I feel bad now. It makes me feel bad and embarrassed that I haven't voted . . . I feel that it's ignorance in the way I was raised . . . I was always raised, like, 'It doesn't matter if you vote. It doesn't matter if you speak up because they're never going to listen to you. You're a minority, they're always going to see you less.'" [Veronica Vazquez, 35, No Affiliation, Dallas] Another nonvoter said, "I mean, my whole family—my mom's not a voter, and my grandparents are not voters. My great-grandparents are not voters. No one's voted. My younger kids, my younger siblings, they're not voters. Nobody's voted. My family wasn't born and raised on politics, and I feel like I want to change that." [Peter Anthony Guzman, 28, Democrat, San Antonio]

> *"I've never even registered to vote . . . I just felt like if we vote, that it's not really validated. I think that it's just picked otherwise and I don't think our votes really count. When we vote for the presidency and stuff like that, I feel like it's picked amongst the government or higher power in the office. I don't think that our votes really count towards the election or the president who is going to be picked."*
>
> Theresa Dominguez, 27,
> No Affiliation, Houston

Racism and Belonging

Racism and discrimination also play a role in voter disempowerment and disengagement, although this is not a perspective directly voiced by nonvoters themselves, even if they feel they are impacted by racism. (For further discussion, see Chapter 2, Section 5, Ethnicity, Identity

and the Latino Vote.) Rather, racism divides people, and can damage a sense of belonging for Latinos. As one nonvoter said, “There are a lot of white people that are racist. They don't like Hispanics or Blacks. That's pretty much why they do the stuff they do. Or they think that we shouldn't be here in America, we should be in Mexico, stuff like that . . . That’s what I think. They don't want us here. I hear it all the time.” [Jon Leal, 33, No Affiliation, Dallas] Like a number of our interviewees, another nonvoter said that anti-Latino racism has worsened: “We get racially profiled every day.” [Peter Anthony Guzman, 28, Democrat, San Antonio]

This experience of racism as a rejection of belonging seems to impact voting behavior. But at the same time, unlike nonvoters, some voters used voting as a response to or defiance of racism: “When [Latinos] do vote it seems like [White] votes are heard more than ours . . . I feel that if that’s my city or my town or my state that I'm living in, I want us, our votes as Latinos, to be known, because we live here, we vote, we pay our taxes just like everybody else, but our voice is not heard.” [Ryan Elizalde, 38, Democrat, Houston]

Income and Voting Frequency

While this study was not designed as a quantitative study—meaning our findings are not statistically predictive—we were surprised when we compared the voting frequency of the 104 people we interviewed with their household income levels. Among nonvoters and the most consistent regular voters, there was a perfect relationship between the numbers. (See Appendix, Section 1, Participant Demographics.) That is to say, the percentage of regular voters increased with every higher class level, while the percentage of nonvoters did exactly the opposite. Among those considered poor, meaning their household income is less than $20,000, 43.5 percent were nonvoters, and 26.1% were regular voters. By contrast, among upper-middle-class participants—those whose household income was above $100,000—8.3 percent were nonvoters, and 66.7% were regular voters. As described above, lower-income individuals often have less experiences and feelings of empowerment and belonging, and they are overwhelmed by day-to-day needs more immediately critical to their survival. They focus on things they feel they can and must control. Turning poor nonvoters into voters is likely the biggest challenge, and requires understanding

> *“If I had a friend or someone that was into [politics] I could possibly learn from [them]. My wife doesn’t watch the news, really. I watch more news than she does . . . I’m fine watching the news in the morning, I hear about voting and stuff whenever it happens, but it doesn’t make me want to go jump out and vote though.”*
>
> Jon Leal, 33,
> No Affiliation, Dallas

the implications of their daily reality and investing even more in creating experiences of empowerment and belonging that can serve as pathways to voting.

Age

While nonvoters can be found among all age groups, younger nonvoters are more common. But it does not appear that youth alone is to blame. We discovered that age is a more important factor in non-voting when individuals are not surrounded by voters or exposed to other empowerment pathways leading to voting. We also discovered that while some people learn to become voters as they grow older, many nonvoters become more entrenched in their disengagement over time. Much like voting, resistance to voting can also become habitual, developing, for some, into an insurmountable blockage. Our findings suggest that younger people may be more receptive to activating messages, as compared with older people, who need to come to voting on their own terms.

IMPLICATIONS:

They Need and Want to Be Convinced

Only a small minority of nonvoters we talked to were resolute that they would never vote. Most nonvoters or infrequent voters were open to the idea and showed the potential to be influenced. Many were curious and wanted to know more about voting and its significance, especially after we asked them about their points of view. In a variety of ways, a number of the nonvoters we spoke with seemed to want to feel part of something bigger—something that could influence politics and the world for the better.

Information Gaps to Fill

Nonvoters are seeking more information to guide them in voting. Many elections, especially on local, county, and even state levels, include dozens of candidates who are essentially unknown and unknowable through existing media channels. Additionally, many potential voters fail to fully understand what exactly these officials do and how they impact policymaking. They want more reliable resources, including nonpartisan resources where they can learn more about different offices and their roles. This does not preclude partisan perspectives, to be clear. But as empowered individuals, people want to feel responsible for their voting education and make well-informed decisions. They prefer to be supported in properly understanding and weighing the choices than to simply be told who to vote for, especially for those individuals who are not highly partisan or longtime voters.

Making Media Narratives More Empowering

Reshaping political narratives, especially in the media, has potential value in transforming nonvoters. While more information on politics is not the key driver for voting, the shape of media narratives is often problematic. Most political storylines leave Latino audiences feeling disempowered, because they describe politicians too often like powerful actors that compete against one another, rather than policymakers seeking to change the shape of society. This reinforces the belief among some nonvoters that decisions that matter in government are made elsewhere, by powerful others.

Disagreements among politicians can be framed by news outlets around how they seek to impact everyday life through their policy proposals, and why they believe this. We would like to see more stories that connect the dots between voting, political offices, policy, and implementation. This could help turn nonvoters into engaged voters, who don't just follow political news, but understand how government works and how it impacts their life. We would also like to see more stories about why voting matters and how.

> *"That's the thing. I love reading about [politics], I love watching it, but I just don't see, I haven't been convinced to actually go out there and do it, and vote. That's what I want is, I want to be able to be convinced . . . and once I get that convincing, once they convince me and show me the proper ways to go approach these things, then I'll be out there voting."*
>
> Peter Anthony Guzman, 28, Democrat, San Antonio

3. VOTING AS A SOCIAL HABIT

Some people are motivated to vote in specific elections by specific candidates, parties, or policy debates. They consciously recognize the urgent need to vote because they care about what's at stake in a particular election. But it seems that the most consistent voters vote by habit. This is not unlike other routine habits such as brushing teeth or drinking coffee in the morning. People may consciously recognize their habitual participation in activities, but their motivation may exist at a deeper, sometimes unconscious or implicit level.

As social animals, all humans have an inherent tendency to imitate other humans, especially when we share a common bond of identity or community. In other words, many habits are learned and shared behaviors. This is what social scientists also often call normative behaviors, because these activities feel like normal or seemingly natural ways of doing things. For example, in our research, we did not talk to anybody who figured out their need to vote in isolation of their social experiences, through a purely rational thinking process. In fact, we spoke with some extremely intelligent, well-educated people who understood how voting works and could even explain the value of voting in a democracy, yet they still didn't vote. A couple of participants had volunteered in political campaigns, but were not voting. This suggests that for Latinos, as with all voters, it's important not just to communicate the importance of voting, but to find ways of making voting a regular "social habit."

> *"I'm excited [when I go to the polls], for one, because usually whenever we go vote, we go in groups, with people that I've worked with previously. Like, 'Okay, we're going to go vote.' So, when we go, we're all pumped up, we're ready to vote. Or we'll go with a squad of people to vote. It's crazy and it's fun at the same time. So, we go vote, and then afterwards we come out and we're like, 'Yeah! We voted!' So, it's exciting . . . and not only that. People see that and they're like, 'Man, why are they so pumped up?' Like, 'They just voted.' So, they can see why we voted. It matters."*
>
> Lisa Perez*, 31,
> Democrat, Houston

Instead of rational or intellectual appeals alone, we discovered that voters are prompted to vote through a set of sociocultural forces that suggest, encourage, and/or enable them to vote. Voting can become normative behavior, because over time, people who have been activated to vote begin to feel that voting is simply what citizens do—it's expected of them, and they begin to expect it of themselves. It becomes natural,

like the air they breathe. The most regular Latino voters we spoke with also tended to be surrounded by a community of voters, whether these were family, friends, and/or peers. And the voters who spoke with the strongest sense of personal empowerment in regards to voting and government typically had been raised by parents who voted, suggesting that this is a form or practice of empowerment that can be reproduced and passed on within a community. We did not speak to any nonvoters who grew up around parents who voted regularly.

INSIGHT:

Voting is a social habit, a practice that gets developed over time and through the modeling of others. It's a habit that has not yet been established among Latinos as much as with other ethnic groups, but social habits can be nurtured, developed and shared.

Multiple Pathways to Voting

In our research, we discovered that as a social habit, voting is contagious. This is a finding that aligns with past research on voters and voting among other communities and in different places.[1] So what are the pathways leading Latinos to develop voting habits? And, inversely, what are some of the potential obstacles to these pathways? In short, there is no single pathway that is guaranteed to drive a nonvoter to vote and continue doing it over time—there is no "silver bullet" solution. Rather, voters often pointed to several influences over the course of their lives.

Social Networks Support Voting

Voters talked about becoming activated through the influence of social networks they belong to, including among family and friends. These community networks often consist of fellow Latino voters. Many have people who are close to them who vote, and who essentially have taught them to vote.

For these people, voting is not described as a source of pressure, as much as an influence that they felt, often in subtle ways. The attitude among the most regular voters was: We vote, that's just what we do. One voter talked about influencing her mother to vote: "Me and my mother got together . . . I'm the one that has to encourage her, like, 'Mom, let's go.'" [Josephine Flores, 33, Democrat, San Antonio]. Another voter talked about how his friend group from high school has discussed politics since they were teenagers, and frequently remind each other to vote: "I guess because I was a government major, most of my friends that I know and I've known since high school, they're like me, they vote regularly . . . It's one of those things where we tend to encourage each other, 'Hey, go out and vote' . . . in person and [on] Facebook." [Robert Cuellar*, 45, Democrat, San Antonio]

A number of voters talked about the need to model and influence good behaviors for others, such as family members and especially children. These voters were also more likely to mention

having consistent and/or persistent conversations about politics with family and friends. This included exchanging pragmatic information, such as reminders to vote or that election day is coming up. Voters talked about these conversations happening person-to-person or increasingly, through social media networks.

Voting as Cultural Phenomenon

Another way voting can become a habit is through culture: sharing ideas and collective inspiration. This includes a wide variety of different pathways, many of which seem highly personalized, but are nonetheless shared and often communicated in very public ways. These cultural inspirations intersect with social networks to produce voting habits.

For example, first-generation Latinos appear to be key influencers in their family circles. Many of them have persuaded their naturalized citizen parents to vote, and they pass on the message and set the example for younger generations as well. Compared with second-, third-, or fourth-generation Latinos, who seem more set in established family patterns of engagement or non-engagement, first-generation Latinos appear to be more open to imagining a different future for themselves than what their parents have experienced, which includes being engaged as voters and demanding more from government and public institutions. By contrast, U.S.-born Latinos who come from families that have not voted across generations spoke in ways that reflected less conviction that things could change, and that voting is one way to achieve that. For them, becoming voters required a stronger path of politicization, such as becoming involved in a community organization or taking certain courses in college. This is something seen less with working-class Latinos of later generations, in communities where Latinos have struggled for many years and may be less hopeful about future prospects.

In our interviews, we also heard a variety of narratives of personal discovery that led to voting, all of which included this cultural layer of shared meanings. For example, some voters talked about learning and gaining an understanding of how voting matters and why. One voter we spoke to, who had always thought that “It doesn't matter if I vote,” then encountered a younger cousin who helped inspire her thinking: “She's like, ‘No, trust me. It does matter’ . . . Then she explained to me the whole process . . . Then after that, and of course my church [promoted voting], me going to church, and then me seeing social media [promoting voting] . . . That's what got me started. I shouldn't have listened to my Dad this whole time. Because I don't think he's ever voted.” [Amanda Esparza, 29, Republican, Dallas]

Additionally, some voters began to recognize the value of voting by watching and reading political news. And many voters talked about their need or interest in being heard, and their desire to transform everyday talk and complaints into some sort of action. Many joked or said that, in fact, voting gave them the right to complain about politics. As one voter put it, “Like I told [my parents], well, you complain and complain and complain, but if you don’t vote . . . you lose your right to complain because then you didn’t even make your voice be heard.” [Claudia Perez, 36, No Affiliation, Houston]

On the other hand, some voters talked about voting as a habit that relates to having an education or being well-educated about politics. This view suggests that habits of voting go hand-in-hand with having a certain amount of education. However, our research suggests that getting people involved in voting is more about incorporating Latinos and getting them to feel empowered as voters, in the face of more privileged cultures of education that prioritize voting. Put differently, it is important to not confuse a culture that promotes voting among all people, with measurements of education or intelligence.

Developing a voting habit is often a slow cultural process, as people gradually feel more comfortable and familiar doing it. For example, one newly registered voter talked about her need to have the process properly explained and refreshed periodically. She said, "Maybe if it was the first time . . . somebody came to explain it to you. Even if we had a booklet written down and giving you an explanation of the process . . . [every] four years, you elect the new president and between those four years . . . There's a lot going on which I just don't understand how it goes." [Celeste M. Garcia, 21, Independent, Houston]

Open Access Can Promote Voting Habits

While we did not find that physical access to polls, registration, or voting generally was a determining factor in whether people voted, access may play a role in helping people to maintain voting habits. The motivation to vote comes from a deeper place, but easier access can facilitate practicing and cementing that habit.

Some voters noted that increased accessibility to polls in their city or county had made it easier to vote or removed obstacles. Others remarked on the ease of registering to vote when they renew a driver's license or conduct some other government business, and how that made it easier for them to remain active. Still other voters discussed how they were able to find time in their daily or weekly schedule to get away from work and family obligations in order to vote, and how helpful it was when their workplace encouraged it.

One voter described how he developed his voting habit after he was automatically registered to vote when he obtained his driver's license fifteen years before: "The first time I started voting was in 2004. I was 18. It was immediately right after I graduated from high school . . . It happened when I got my ID . . . I just remember doing it because I was like . . . just expectations of you just go along and do it, kind of thing." [Eduardo Martinez, 33, Democrat, Rio Grande Valley]

How Nonvoters Explained Their Lack of Voting Habits

By contrast, for many nonvoters, voting is not familiar or seen as necessary. In our research, we discovered a set of reasons that participants provided for why some of them had not found themselves on the pathways towards developing voting habits.

We repeatedly heard that nonvoters' families rarely talked about politics or voting while they were growing up. This suggests that intergenerational and close family networks are extremely valuable to promote voting, as we did not speak to any nonvoters who grew up around parents who voted regularly.

Among adult nonvoters, friends and family rarely talk about politics or seriously engage in discussions related to voting.

They are not having these conversations in their lives, or they often do not feel comfortable talking about politics with friends and family. Some nonvoters also said they do not pay much attention to the news or to what is happening in politics today, which would also speak to their lack of interest in politics. But that was not the general rule—more often than not, nonvoters were following politics to some degree. It was simply not a language they often spoke with others or felt comfortable speaking, at least not in active conversation with others.

> *"In 2016 . . . I was registered to vote. I think my mom was registered to vote. We had planned on getting together election night to go vote, but she was not feeling good, she was sick. She's like, 'I can't make it to go take you.' I was like, 'What?' Then I ended up not voting.*
>
> Jessica Cordero, 34,
> Democrat, San Antonio

Supported by Research

In a wide range of quantitative studies, political scientists have similarly discovered empirical regularities that suggest that voting is a habit. For example, past voting behavior is a good predictor of future voting behavior.[2] Virtually all major academic works on voter turnout have found that voting behavior is a gradually acquired habit.[3] In other words, the more that people have voted in the past, the more they continue to do so, "out of habit, as if they didn't have to think much about what they were doing."[4] These habits are vulnerable, however. Studies have found that external forces can disrupt them, such as when voters move to a new home.

IMPLICATIONS:

Develop a Strategy to Build Habits

Voting and not voting are habits, or normative behaviors, learned mainly from family, friends, schools, church, and/or other social and cultural institutions. Understanding how habits and normative behaviors develop may improve voting better than many other forms of voting promotion, such as education or intellectual appeals. While not a motivating factor per se, access to polls and providing nonpartisan information to help people's voting can make people more comfortable voting—information such as where to vote, when to vote, how to vote, what the ballot looks like, and what each elected office does.

Creating Communities of Voting

Beyond that, helping to encourage and develop a "culture of voting" or "communities of voting" by harnessing the power of social imitation, emulation, and influence is crucial. The most powerful way to accomplish this begins with getting more people talking about politics in realistic and pragmatic ways. We need regular people talking with their friends, family, and colleagues about voting: I am going to vote, I am voting today, I just voted, and you should vote, too. This kind of behavior-based community does not need to be overly focused on specific candidates or parties, but instead on the behavioral habit of voting itself. In fact, our interviews suggest that voting behaviors might be enhanced by speaking in more charitable or sympathetic ways about opposition voters. One example in Texas recently is Jolt Initiative's quinceañera program to register new voters.[5,6] The power of this initiative is the way it attempts to associate pro-voting behaviors to an existing sociocultural experience, rather than separating voting from everyday life. Genuine communities of voting need to be interwoven into existing cultural institutions, in order for it to feel like a truly normative behavior. Encouraging parents to take their children to the polls also can serve to get children accustomed to the ritual and practice. Parents are in a uniquely strong position to set expectations their children will carry into adulthood.

> *"My daughter will turn 18 next month. We've already been discussing and planning like we're all going to go vote as a family next presidential election. We have to. Even if whoever we vote for doesn't win, we have to show that we're putting something in and whoever becomes or gets that position in office, we will hold them accountable. That's one thing that I'm trying to teach my daughter."*
>
> Veronica Vasquez, 35,
> No Affiliation, Dallas

Endnotes

1 More on this below, but see, for example: Gerber, Green, and Shachar, "Voting May Be Habit-Forming: Evidence From A Randomized Field Experiment," AJPS 47 (2003):540-550.

2 David Nickerson, "Just How Addictive is Voting and Why?" Working Paper (2004).

3 Eric Plutzer, "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources and Growth in Young Adulthood," American Political Science Review 96 (2002): 42.

4 Wendy Wood and John Aldrich, "How Voting Becomes a Habit," The Hill, 2019, https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/456934-how-voting-becomes-a-habit.

5 "Poder Quince," Jolt Initiative, accessed September 1, 2020, http://www.joltinitiative.org/poder-quince/

6 Cat Cardenas, "How Teenagers Are Using Their Quinceañeras To Boost The Latinx Vote In Texas," Texas Monthly, October 24, 2019, https://www.texasmonthly.com/politics/latinx-voters-texas-quinceaneras/.

4. POLITICAL PARTNERSHIP VS. HYBRIDITY

The American political system is mainly a two-party system, and this study found that neither party, Republicans or Democrats, have truly engaged Texas Latinos. And voters themselves feel that political candidates and elected officials do not understand the issues they confront in their daily lives. Yet, a strong allegiance to a political party is one of various factors that can potentially drive civic engagement and voter turnout, since enthusiastic followers are more likely to follow political events, vote in order to support their party's candidates, and feel that their interests are represented by government. This section examines the way that Latinos who are active voters, whether they vote regularly or occasionally, think about political parties and partisan divides. It is not focused on what parties they prefer, but on how they relate to dominant political ideologies and partisan divides, versus how they parse their own political views. Partisanship is one link in the chain that ultimately determines whether people vote and feel represented, and here we look at how Latinos relate to that link.

> *"I guess I don't want to define myself as one thing. I don't want to define myself as a Democrat or a Republican, because there are some things I can appreciate [that] the Republicans have done. There are some things that Democrats have done . . . You have to give and take, but you have to find the one candidate that you can feel and trust is going to do what they say they are."*
>
> Veronica Vazquez, 35,
> No Affiliation, Dallas

Partisanship refers to the sorting and defining of people into political groups with similar causes or ideologies. Partisans are considered people who are committed supporters of their party, whether in their capacity as official or elected representatives, or as dedicated voters. Strong partisanship often means that people support their party loyally, are reluctant to compromise its policies and principles, and reject opposing viewpoints—namely from partisans on the other side of the aisle. Political polarization refers to the growing divide that strong partisanship tends to produce among voters—in the United States, an increasingly stark gulf between Republicans and Democrats. One symptom of deep polarization is the refusal to compromise, resulting, at the legislative level, in either gridlock, or in one party forcing its policies through the government, only to possibly be undone if the pendulum swings back to the other party in the next election.

While the American political media bombards readers today with stories about polarization, much of their angle derives from quantitative

polling data and policy debates among elite political players in Washington D.C. The vast majority of op-eds, think pieces and books about polarization offer explanatory frameworks imposed from above, rather than considering how voters themselves analyze their political worlds in their own terms. Today, we are dealing with a hyper-narrated and over-theorized subject: The American Voter, and The Latino Voter as a subset constituency. It's within this tangled web of discourses that real-life voters exist, making sense of their own political views and actions.

Among Latino voters in Texas, our interviews revealed a surprising degree of ambivalence about both major political parties, as well as political leaning labels such as "conservative," "moderate," or "progressive." Most commonly, we encountered voters who instead explained their political perspectives in a manner that we describe as fluid and hybrid. Instead of reiterating common partisan or ideological stances on particular policy issues, they assessed those issues individually and independently, based on their personal experiences or those of their family, friends, or community. In other words, instead of being informed by a particular political ideology, they more often than not developed highly personalized frameworks for critically thinking about government, elected leaders, and policy.

Research has shown that a growing number of Americans are repudiating partisanship and eschewing identification with either of the two major parties.[1] However, we found additional reasons why Latinos as a whole are not highly partisan voters: 1.) Many of them have political views and values that do not neatly fit within one party's ideology; 2.) They don't have a strong history of allegiance with either party, since neither party has substantively engaged Latinos, and because they are newer voters whose family members have not supported one party across generations; and 3.) A small number of conscientious voters, especially younger voters, are choosing to identify as independents in light of what they view as a failed two-party system. While a rigorous comparative study to other ethnic groups is warranted, we surmise that Latinos are either more independent, and/or they feel less belonging and attachment to the major political parties and their brands.

INSIGHT:

Supporting a political party is one factor that can drive voter turnout and civic engagement, however, partisanship is delicate or weak among Latinos, even for those who regularly vote for or affiliate with one party. Instead, "hybridity" or fluidity is their more common approach to political values and ideology.

Independent Thinking

Given today's intense partisanship at the national level and the highly polarized media and public discourse, we expected to hear Latinos speaking in similar ways—expressing partisanship and increasing polarization in their political views. However, on the whole,

our qualitative evidence did not show that Latino voters are part of a deeply divided or increasingly polarized American political environment. Instead, we discovered a large showing of people who consider themselves independent or who indicated that they had "no affiliation," even if they voted in some or many elections. Many quantitative polls classify Latino voters primarily as Republican or Democratic, and miss capturing this large demographic that sees itself as standing outside of either party. These are people not adequately understood or represented in media stories about polarization.

Even among those voters who do affiliate as Democrat or Republican and consistently vote for their party, we found a significant degree of openness to ideas from other ideological positions. We spoke with very few people who felt that "their" party was always right or almost always right. A number of participants stated that they would still be open to a candidate or policy proposal from the opposing party, and didn't want to position themselves as staunchly or rigidly ideological. One voter said, "I don't want to go to either extreme. I want to go right in the middle because, like I said, sometimes I'll get ideas from over here, sometimes from over here. I'll never fully agree with either side. I think you have to judge whatever both sides are saying and taking into [account] how that decision might impact your daily life or the life of your family, your community, and whatnot." [Oscar J. Nuñez Martinez, 33, Democrat, El Paso]

Some voters' views mapped onto political positions more commonly associated with the other party. For example, a number of conservative-leaning Latinos said they believe government should help certain disadvantaged people (e.g. the elderly, poor, or homeless), or that immigrant families should not be separated and more of them should be allowed to enter the country. Liberal-leaning voters sometimes agreed with conservatives around issues such as gun rights or certain immigration restrictions. One independent voter we spoke with, a school police officer, cared passionately about national security and education, and he said that candidates' specific stances on issues were more important to him than their party affiliation or their charisma. He explained: "Well, tell me what he's about, where's his political platform? I want to know what this guy is about before I vote for him." [Manuel Charles, 41, Independent, Rio Grande Valley]

When we asked Latinos if they knew what each of the parties stood for, few could strongly or confidently identify the differences. Overall, there was low engagement with or deep understanding of the parties' specific ideologies and platforms. To be clear, most recognized a difference between the parties and held their own notions about whose interests each party represents.

> *"I just go off of what [the political parties] have to offer. I don't really care, I guess, if it's Republican, Democrat, liberal . . . I do care as to what they're going to do and how they're going to do it."*
>
> Jose Vargas, 30,
> No Affiliation, San Antonio

But when pressed, they could not engage in a more detailed evaluation of Republican versus Democratic ideals.

There are public assumptions about Latinos' "natural" inclination to affiliate with one party or the other. Not only did our data not support these theories that Latinos as a group intrinsically fit with Democrats or Republicans, but our interviewees themselves pushed back on these assumptions and generalizations. One regular voter told us: "Being Hispanic, you figure with our culture and our way of thinking, we vote [for Party A]. But here we are, a lot of Hispanics vote for [Party B]." [Luis E. Buenrostro, 61, Independent, Rio Grande Valley] Another one reminded us that people, "aren't as straightforward as you think. They can lean any kind of way." He underscored that rigid partisan positions threatened to turn some voters off.

Common Ideological Labels Don't Resonate

Further, political and ideological labels—such as "progressive," "liberal," "moderate," and "conservative"—largely do not resonate with Texas Latinos. When we asked them if they identified with those terms, the majority of participants said they did not, and could not define the terms very well. Not only did they not attach specific meanings, but they seemed disinterested; these were not terms they regularly used in thinking of themselves as political actors. And among newer citizens and Spanish-speaking participants, there was some confusion about the meaning of the word "liberal" in particular, which they associated with renouncing all social norms (akin to "liberal" in Spanish).

We asked about these terms not to understand which way Latinos lean, but to see if the terminology of American political discourse resonates with them. With these words in particular, used to signal ideology, there was a strong disconnect.

Not Moderates, Either

At the same time that most Latinos do not map easily onto specific party ideologies, we would not simply characterize most of the Latino voters we spoke with as non-partisan, centrist, or moderate. Rather, as we emphasize above, we noted a degree of fluidity and hybridity in their political viewpoints. Most of them are informed about politics—some quite well-informed—but they do not necessarily fit into neat political or partisan categories, and many hold views that fall along different points of the ideological spectrum.

Parties Aren't Speaking To Latinos

Another reason why partisanship is low among Latinos is that most of them are new voters who don't come from families or community networks that have been voting for one party across generations. Relatively few of them told stories about who their parents and grandparents voted for. But it is also a function of how little Latino outreach both parties have engaged in historically and, to a large degree, still today.

Most Latinos we spoke with had never met a candidate running for any office, nor had they been contacted by any campaigns. Few could share stories about campaign rallies or party outreach efforts that sought to draw them in. As a whole, they did not see themselves or their interests reflected among candidates from either party.

They did not feel that either party was engaging in ongoing dialogue or nurturing relationships with Latino voters and communities.

Instead, it was more common to hear Latinos express resentment at the parties for only courting Latino votes when it is politically expedient. As one voter put it, "I feel like a lot of leaders are using us as Mexicans. They are using Mexicans for votes." [Cruz Amparo Gatica, 36, Republican, San Antonio] Another one told us: "When they say, 'We want Latinos to come out,' I feel that most of the time this is like, 'I just need your vote.' That's it. Like, 'Just give me your vote, and I'm not making any promises.'" [Oscar J. Nuñez Martinez]

This research underscores that no political party has genuinely engaged with Latinos in Texas, either through personalized interactions, ground-up tactics, generational work, or any other form of authentic communication or outreach. In turn, weak partisanship among Latinos is likely tied, at least in part, to this failure on the part of the parties.

Repudiation of Two-Party System

Among younger Latino voters, we spoke with a handful who identified themselves as "independent" because they feel that the two-party system has failed. Instead, they sought to carve out their own political identity, or a political pathway that could advocate for all Americans, and not just either party's traditional interests. One such voter complained that, "People are not thinking critically . . . They just stick to their side . . . It's like they are going to a football game and they're like, 'Who is the red? Who is the blue?' They are not even questioning themselves and saying, 'Okay, what can we learn from each other?' It's so polarized . . . If it were up to me, no one would have a political party affiliation." [Michelle Cano*, 38, Independent, Rio Grande Valley]

Another young Latina explained that she voted for one party "by default," calling it "the lesser of two evils." She stated: "I would never vote [for Party A], I consistently vote [for Party B]. But I'm also keenly aware of how [Party B] has not had the Black and Brown community's backs for a really long time . . . I wouldn't identify myself publicly as a [Party B]." [Melissa Tamez, 27, No Affiliation, Rio Grande Valley]

Exhausted With Partisanship

Overall among Latino voters, we heard a significant exhaustion with partisanship. For many of them, this seemed to result in a lack of faith in both parties and their political agendas, as well as the political system as a whole. The intense ideological and power struggles they perceive between the parties has led many participants to feel that the focus of electoral politics is not truly about representing citizens' interests and needs. They expressed significant doubts over whether we have a truly representative democracy, not just for Latinos, but for all Americans. As one voter put it, "I wish I could see some sort of compromise between the parties. It's a lot different than I remember [when I was growing up]. It wasn't as hateful as it is now . . . How do I feel? I'm disappointed in a lot of the parties, there's a lot of mudslinging now." [Daniel Lopez, 51, Independent, Rio Grande Valley]

Partisanship may specifically have a dampening effect on political conversations in Latino communities among friends and family. While some participants told us they discuss politics with family members, many others talked about

avoiding political conversations that could cause conflict or disagreement, or even avoiding the news. Some consider partisanship an obstacle to independent, critical thinking, or an obstacle to navigating the political landscape. Still others said it was too emotionally taxing and not worth the effort.

IMPLICATIONS:

Mind The Gap

Most Latino voters do not necessarily share the common discourses of American politics and elected leaders. Learning about Latinos' interests and their political hybridity is important to improve communication and ensure messages can connect with the interests of Latinos. Above all, humanizing key policy issues and focusing communication tools on real-life situations are valuable strategies that can move communications beyond potentially polarizing partisan debates that don't resonate with Latinos.

Whose Categories?

Political media, pollsters, and those who use their data-driven insights need to take partisan polarization reports with a bigger grain of salt, particularly with Latinos. When it comes down to forecasting elections, there is certainly some truth in polls, and we don't contest their findings. However, this study made us aware of what those polls aren't able to capture—the nuance and hybridity that gets lost in multiple-choice surveys, which can explain why Latinos' voting behavior, including turnout, doesn't always follow the predicted patterns. For those groups with broader strategic goals, including building the electorate and devising responsive policy that benefits Latinos, the overly simplistic lumpings of the population into Democrat vs. Republican,

> *"IIf the right Republican comes by and has a favorable opinion and [the] right motives and method of doing things, well, then, yes, I will vote for him."*
>
> Ryan Elizalde, 38,
> Democrat, Houston

Liberal vs. Conservative, or Left vs. Right are doing a disservice. Our findings clearly show that most Latinos don't naturally fall into neat and tidy political categories.

Caution About Partisanship Theories

In the course of our research, we read many different theories that seek to explain the recent growth in so-called "public partisanship" (among voters and/or the general public) and "elite partisanship" (among political elites, politicians, and/or party operatives). These explanatory theories assume a wide range of motivating factors among voters, but the important point to recognize is that none of these theories begin with listening to or engaging humans. They impose political categories and trends from an external perspective. This works as social science, but it's deeply problematic from the perspective of building political engagement or connecting people with the making of policy.

From our perspective, a more engaging communications approach for reaching voters—and especially potential voters—would focus on the vulnerabilities of individuals and families, while showing how specific policies can lead to tangible, positive change.

> *"People are not thinking critically . . . because they just stick to their side . . . It's like they have blinders, and the blinders are political parties. If it were up to me, no one would have a political party affiliation. There should not be any."*
>
> Michelle Cano*, 38, Independent, Rio Grande Valley

Endnotes

1 "Party Identification Trends, 1992-2014." Pew Research Center. April 7, 2015. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/04/07/party-identification-trends-1992-2014/#total.

5. ETHNICITY, IDENTITY AND THE LATINO VOTE

Latino political theorists have examined the complexities obscured by the assumption that there is a collective "Latino vote."[1] The idea that Latinos form one political constituency, interest group, or "voting bloc" presumes that they have common political interests based on their ethnicity, and that they stand to benefit from the same policy proposals. The term "Latino" also suggests that they share a sense of collective identity and a distinct cultural consciousness.[2]

Quantitative studies help to perpetuate this notion that Latinos have shared political interests when they poll Latino voters with varied ethnic, racial, class and geographic backgrounds and produce lump averages suggesting what issues Latinos care about, which candidates they favor, and which policy prescriptions they support. This creates a form of knowledge about Latino voters that then circulates in the media and among political pundits. Campaign staff and political organizers are left using constructed polling averages to guide how they target and engage would-be voters. So are organizations working to improve civic engagement and build the electorate.

But time and time again, after an election passes, journalists and pundits are left questioning why Latino voters did not vote exactly as predicted, or as cohesively as Black voters, for example. Our study opens up those questions. It does not attempt to determine what candidates or specific policy proposals Latinos collectively support. Rather, it examines the complexity of what it means to be "Latino" and a Latino voter.
How do various Latinos think of themselves in relation to their ethnicity? What, if anything, does this have to do with how they think and behave politically? Do they see similarities in their political interests? And do race and ethnicity shape their wider social experiences as Americans?

> *"I've called myself everything. I think I like 'Mexican American.' I don't mind calling myself Hispanic. I don't say, 'Oh, I'm Latina.' If someone says, 'Are you Latina?' I'm like, 'Yes, I guess so. If it's the bubble, and that's the only option.'"*
>
> Michelle Cano*, 38,
> Independent, Rio Grande Valley

A qualitative study allowed us to examine the way various Latino voters self-identify, how they relate to their ethnicity, and whether this translates to a collective consciousness and political platform. What we found is that the heterogeneity of Latino voter identities and political views is not just due to differences in ethnicities and nationalities

(Mexican vs. Puerto Rican vs. Guatemalan). Even among working-class Mexican Americans, for example, who made up a significant portion of our interviewees, we found a great diversity of opinions and values, and ways in which they relate to ethnic identity and interests. However, we also discovered some common themes, including that many Latinos experience discrimination in their everyday lives, yet they struggle to fully articulate it in the language and frameworks popularly used to describe American systemic racism.

INSIGHT:

Latino political identity is a complex, slippery and strategic identity. Texas Latinos relate strongly to their ethnicity, but they identify with more specific ethnic or national-origin labels, or with the umbrella term "Hispanic," than with "Latino" or "Latinx." The majority do not feel there is a singular "Latino Vote," despite its potential to sway elections. And while many have experienced discrimination, they are not galvanized around a shared sense of political struggle, due to a lack of public awareness of Latino history and racism.

Mexican American, Hispanic, Latino—or Latinx?

Some of the richest moments in our interviews were when we discussed identity and naming with our interviewees. People make sense of who they are in wonderfully diverse, complex ways, and no two people answered our question of about ethnic labels the same way. Identity is relational, and people's experience and description of it was couched also in their nationality, geography, generation, and their politics and ideological leanings.

Overall, we found that Texas Latinos prefer identity labels that reference their specific ethnicity or national origin—terms such as Mexican, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, etc. These assertions of ethnicity and/or nationality were more vivid to them. They seemed to speak more directly to their "roots," as one participant put it, and their daily lives: "I identify as Puerto Rican, mostly because I believe that although Hispanic is the umbrella term and there is solidarity between Hispanics as a whole . . . people still want to go back to their roots." [Guillermo Orsini, 20, Democrat, San Antonio]

But running a close second to these specific ethnic or national-origin labels, the umbrella term "Hispanic" is widely used. This is a term that historically has been used throughout the country including Texas, to describe people who hail from Spanish-speaking countries. Some participants specifically spoke to the fact that "Hispanic" has been the language of government transactions. As one participant said, "I usually just say I'm Mexican. If I'm filling out a form, I'm Hispanic." [Luisa Hernandez, 24, Democrat, Dallas]

Latino played a similar role—one woman told us it was the term she used when she was "filling out the bubble" on a form. [Michelle Cano*, 38,

Independent, Rio Grande Valley] Yet it came in roughly third, after specific ethnic labels and the term "Hispanic." The term Latino was interesting because it opened up discussions about whether it applies only to people who were born in Latin America, or to U.S.-born individuals, with some participants confusing "Latino" with "Latin American." In particular, several Mexicans and Mexican Americans insisted that they specifically were not Latino, although other people are. One woman told us: "Latino to me is people from other countries, like Colombians, Hondureños, Salvadoreños. They're Latinos to me because they're from another country . . . So for me, I'm Hispanic. I don't consider myself a Latina." [Lisa Perez*, 31, Democrat, Harris]

Interestingly, the term that was least used was "Latinx"—though it's a term that has recently been widely adopted by the media and in progressive political spaces. The term is a gender-neutral version of "Latino," yet less than a handful of participants we spoke with used the term, the vast majority had never heard of it or did not know what it meant. One woman said, "I'm not a fan of this whole 'Latinx' thing. The first time I even saw it, I was, like, 'Latinx?' . . . I said, 'What is Latinx?' I was like, 'Oh, Latin-X.' It just sounds weird to me. I don't know." [Adriana Colon, 45, Democrat, Dallas] In fact, recent polling has found that this is the case nationally.[3]

Almost every person we interviewed used some term that referred to their ethnicity, although among a minority of participants—mostly independent or politically right-leaning males—they were careful to assert that their ethnic identity didn't take precedence over being an American.
As one of them put it: "I am Mexican American just because my parents were. They raised me in a Mexican household, but I'm an American first and foremost . . . I understand the term minority, but I feel like if we just stopped viewing ourselves as different sections in this city, or races, that would break the barrier between different races or ethnicities." [Matthew Ramirez*, 23, No Affiliation, El Paso]

In short, the takeaway is that while "Latino" has become the most common term in political circles, it is important to recognize that this is not an identity

> *"[My grandmother is] like, 'You're a Mexican American, and you're white on your birth certificate.' I was like, 'I'm white on my birth certificate, but I'm a Mexican American? Okay.' I just said, 'I want to look at my birth certificate.' Not too long ago, I looked at it and it sure as heck says I'm White, on my birth certificate . . . I'm Hispanic . . . an American that has Hispanic descent, I guess. Yes, Hispanic descent."*
>
> Joshua Casso, 35,
> Republican, San Antonio

label that feels innate or natural to people. Overall, Texas Latinos understand that it's a construction that refers to them, and they identify with it to varying degrees, but it's not a term that resonates deeply or that speaks to their daily experiences of their ethnicity and culture.

Is There a Latino Vote?

Overall, participants were split on the question of whether there is such a thing as a collective "Latino Vote." We explored this question by further asking them if they believed that Latinos have similar political interests. The majority said they don't, given the many differences among Latinos of nationality, ethnicity, citizenship, and ideology. For instance, one woman who volunteers to inform immigrants of their rights said, "I'm still considered Latino or Hispanic or whatever, but my needs might not be the same needs of somebody who's undocumented." [Claudia Perez, 36, No Affiliation, Houston] And a young man said: "I feel that everybody has their own opinion, and you vote towards what you feel. And there's some White people I agree with more than some of my coworkers." [Angel S. Avila, Republican, 25, El Paso] Yet another voter told us, "We seem to vote every which way because we all have different views as Latinos. Some of our views are contradicting depending on where we grew up, where we were raised . . . and what our parents taught us." [Ryan Elizalde, 38, Democrat, Harris]

But other individuals did feel that Latinos have some shared policy interests. One participant explained: "Like, immigration policies. A lot of Latinos are working-class, so, health care. Things like that. Of course, I can't help but bring up again, though, abortion is just so important to them." In popular discourse, the notion that Latinos have similar interests mostly rests on their presumed shared interest in immigration.
But interestingly, although we found that indeed, it's an important issue for many Texas Latinos, even their policy positions around immigration varied widely. (See Chapter 2, Section 6, Immigration Matters.)

Many of our interviewees did, however, feel that even though the Latino Vote is a construction that does not reflect Latinos' diverse needs and political views, as a political coalition, Latinos have the power to affect the outcome of elections. They recognized the potential of a group agency that could be activated more powerfully if more people turn out to vote.

Ethnic Minority or Person of Color?

We also asked our interviewees if they related to the terms "ethnic minority" and "person of color." Our reason for asking these questions was not only if they saw themselves as ethnically or racially different from other Americans, but to understand if the language and terms that are being used in the public discourse to discuss the intersection of politics and race resonate with Latinos—that is, to see if they feel implicated in these conversations.

Most of our respondents identified as ethnic minorities and defined this as being different, other, non-White. Some of them described structural disadvantages that they saw were tied to this, such as the unequal distribution of public resources. Yet, in places like San Antonio, El Paso and the Rio Grande Valley, people recognized that they have never been or are no longer numerical minorities—in fact, they are the majority—so the term seemed to be losing meaning and relevance. One interviewee told us, "I mean, I think that here it's okay, in San Antonio it's okay. I'm the majority, I don't feel as 'other' around being Hispanic . . . but somehow in other cities, it can be more salient.

It just depends on how people treat me, I guess. You don't know you're another until someone else makes you feel like one." [Melissa Vela-Williamson, 39, Republican, San Antonio.] But for some participants, this majority status threatened to obscure the ways in which Latinos in their region continue to experience different structural outcomes than Whites, despite being the larger ethnic group.

When it came to the term "person of color," most participants did not relate to the term. Some did, and they understood that the term referred to the experience of being racially different. One young male told us, "The people of color I guess is us. I believe we're colored . . . I believe we are. I feel like the White don't look at us as [if] we are White. I mean, the Black don't look at us as we're them. You know what I'm saying? We're our own color, we are our own race . . . As to whether there's racism towards us? Yes, because we're Mexicans." [Fernando Morales, 28, No Affiliation, San Antonio]

However, for the great majority who did not relate to the term, it was not due to the fact that they do not see or experience themselves as being ethnically or racially different. It also was not because they didn't want to associate with Blacks. Rather, most of them had heard vaguely of the term, and had not heard it applied directly to them. One man, a socially and politically aware bilingual education teacher, went a bit further, saying that he believed the term technically encompasses Latinos, but in practice, it mostly gets employed to refer to Blacks: "I think when people talk about a person of color right now, they're talking about, I would say, more African-American. I am a person of color, but as far as politically, I don't think when they say something that as a person of color, I don't think they're considering [me] . . . I do consider myself one, but I don't think when I see national politics, I don't feel that kind of resounds with me." [Gabriel Alatorre, 39, Democrat, San Antonio]

Again, the way we read our interviewees' responses is not that most of them refuse to associate with Blacks or to think of themselves as racially different. Instead, "person of color" is a term that is used politically and strategically in coalition building, but we believe it hasn't "trickled down" to many Texas Latinos, or it's hard for them to relate it to their everyday experiences.

> *"Some people say 'Chicano.' Some people say 'Latina.' Some people say, 'You're Mexican American, you're not mexicana, because you're not from Mexico.' I say that I'm mexicana, because I'm not White. I don't feel White, that's how I feel. I may not know everything, but I weep with the people. I consider them my own."*
>
> Monica Vega, 36,
> Democrat, San Antonio

Is There Racism Against Latinos?

And yet, in their daily lives, the majority of Latinos we spoke with do experience racism and discrimination, or lesser slights as a result of their ethnicity that nonetheless leave deep imprints. When we asked participants if they had ever been discriminated against or been made to feel different, they overwhelmingly had stories to tell. More than a few males talked about having been racially profiled by local police or state or federal law enforcement. Many people talked about low expectations that were had of them in school. Some people talked about the difficulty of being promoted in jobs due to their ethnicity. One young man in San Antonio, in discussing his own struggles with housing and homelessness, had a sense that Latinos in his hometown were disproportionately facing some of the same issues he was.

Clearly, Latinos in Texas are experiencing their lives through the lens and consequences of their ethnicity. What many of them lacked, it seemed, was a way to understand and articulate it as racism—and especially, as structural racism.

Surely, many Latinos spoke emotionally about the national intensification of anti-Latino sentiments. They decried public discourses that vilify Latinos and policies that disproportionately expose Latino immigrants to fear, suffering and anxiety. (See Chapter 2, Section 6, Immigration Matters.) A number of them felt personally wounded when a young White shooter killed 23 Latinos at an El Paso Walmart. (See Chapter 4, Other Things We Heard.) But in their day-to-day lives, they lacked the language and the frameworks to make sense of their experiences as structural or systemic racism—a kind of racism emanating not just from personal encounters, but from the unequal material and social conditions of their lives.

We believe that one of the reasons this is the case is that historically, racism against Latinos has not been widely discussed in Texas. Although there is a long history of racial lynching of Mexican Americans and "Jim Crow" laws that segregated them from Whites in schools, public places, and even cemeteries, hardly anyone we interviewed references these histories, or the Chicano Civil Rights Movement through which Mexican Americans in Texas fought for equal rights in the 1970s. Public narratives around racism in Texas and nationally often exclude Latinos, making it more challenging for Latinos to see themselves and recognize their own experiences in those conversations. We did not find Texas Latinos speaking in terms of a shared history or political struggle.

Additionally, structural racism is a concept that requires learning—being able to critically assess systemic causes and consequences—and it's not a form of thinking and analysis that most people acquire on their own, or even through their schooling. Latinos who are not explicitly politicized around race issues are left instead making sense of their experiences on their own, in isolation from broader conversations. For this reason, we found many of our interviewees speaking of experiences that clearly seemed like racial incidents, but falling just short of calling them that.

Having collective political interests around race or ethnicity requires not just having similar social experiences—but having a way to make sense of those experiences collectively, and then turn them into political awareness, engagement, and claim-making. This has not happened in a widespread way among Texas Latinos as it has among Blacks, for example.

But there is much room for building personal and public awareness as a first step towards confronting anti-Latino racism, and using this to drive higher levels of civic engagement and voter turnout.

> *"For me, my emoji is yellow. I don't even have a brown emoji, because I consider myself human above all. I'm half Mexican, half Salvadorian. I'm half American."*
>
> Julio Acosta, 34,
> Independent, Dallas

Endnotes

1 Cristina Beltrán, The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

2 Beltrán, The Trouble with Unity, 4.

3 Luis Noe-Bustamante, Lauren Mora and Mark Hugo Lopez, "About One-in-Four U.S. Hispanics Have Heard of Latinx, but Just 3% Use It," Pew Research Center, August 11, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2020/08/11/about-one-in-four-u-s-hispanics-have-heard-of-latinx-but-just-3-use-it/

6. IMMIGRATION MATTERS

Immigration policy is the source of heated debates in today's political environment, a spark reignited in new ways by President Donald Trump's election in 2016. In the June 2015 launch of his candidacy, Trump stated: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're sending people that have a lot of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."

Yet, while immigration policy is widely perceived as the primary issue of political concern for Latinos, this is not the case for most Latinos we spoke with. To be sure, Latinos in Texas have a lot of opinions on immigration, and the issue matters to them deeply—often because friends, family, or their own lives have been impacted by immigration policies and enforcement. These policies also have symbolic significance for some Latinos and their sense of belonging in this country. But a range of other issues frequently take precedence over immigration when Latinos make voting decisions, such as jobs and health care.

Another common perception is that Latinos are adamantly pro-immigration and strongly support progressive immigration policies, but our interviews suggested a more complex picture. In talking with Latinos across the political spectrum in Texas, we found a strong tendency to view immigration in simultaneously aspirational and pragmatic ways. This seeming contradiction reveals that while Latinos have embraced immigration as a viable pathway to improve their economic lives, they also understand the realities and limitations of immigration in more realistic and intimate ways than other groups.

> *"I feel that Hispanics and Mexicans have kind of been vilified . . . I feel that we're just creating a lot of anger and animosity that is unnecessary because to me, if somebody called one of my family members an illegal immigrant, I would be, like, humans cannot—we're not illegal. That's dehumanizing. That's not a proper term to use."*
>
> Jamie Martinez*, 31,
> No Affiliation, San Antonio

These nuanced views do not exist in a vacuum. Discourses and popular narratives around immigration and immigrants have partly shaped how Latinos view the issue. Analyses of American media show that since the 1970s, portrayals of Latino immigration have steadily grown negative.[1] Many earlier reports commonly used symbolically-charged words and phrases

to describe the migration flows, such as “crisis,” “rising tide” and “flooding.” Over time, those metaphors have given way to more war-like terminology to refer to Latino immigration, such as “invasion,” “under siege,” and “enemies.” In listening to Latinos speak about the issue, we realized that the pervasiveness of negative public discourses about immigration has had a direct and sometimes profound impact on their own views. Many Latinos are unable to talk or think about immigration outside these powerful narrative frames, whether they are challenging them, incorporating them into their own opinions, or, for some, accepting them as true.

INSIGHT:

Immigration is a widely discussed and important issue for Latinos, but not the top issue that determines their voting behavior and level of political engagement. Across the political spectrum, Texas Latinos believe in the aspirational dream of immigration, but widely accept the premise of a system that is regulated and controlled.

Latinos Support Legal Migration

While Latinos care deeply about and support immigration, few if any of our interviewees spoke about opening the border with Mexico or decriminalizing unauthorized border crossings. Most respondents across the political spectrum support legal immigration. One voter explained his views this way: “Don't get me wrong, I think that this country deserves all sorts of people from all over the world in here, because that's what's made our country great. But there’s a right way to do it.” [Robert Trujillo*, 45, Republican, Rio Grande Valley] A second voter said, “I feel like those people could be my family. I don't know any of my family down [in Mexico] . . . I don't want to keep them out, I just want to do it the right way.” [Elvia Lopez*, 36, Republican, San Antonio] We heard this refrain about “proper” ways of migrating from voters across the political spectrum. One Houston voter shared: “There are rules we have to oblige by the government in certain aspects of life, whether you're here legally or illegally, visa, green card, whatever race.” He said he supported, “a more orderly but fair process to come into the country.” [Ryan Elizalde, 38, Democrat, Houston]

We found that in general, children of immigrants had the most positive views of immigration, and that those Latinos who were further removed from the migration experience still supported immigration ideologically. Among Texas Latinos, there is a feeling that immigration is inevitable and that some degree of border restriction is also a pragmatic necessity. They believe that the flow of people trying to enter the country should and will be regulated. But most do not say that the

United States has too many immigrants, nor do they make a distinction between labor migrants and political asylum seekers.

Most Latinos we spoke to, from all political stripes, were in favor of granting legal status to unauthorized immigrants brought to the United States as children, who are beneficiaries of work permits and deferred action through DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals).

They Want a System that Works and is Transparent

Texas Latinos across parties also share a strong belief that the U.S. immigration system is dysfunctional. There is concern among some Latinos that border security isn't working properly. Many of those we spoke with believed that people wanting to migrate should be vetted to ensure public health and safety. Few Latinos mentioned terrorism, however, which has been the focus of much immigration legislation since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. As one Latino from Houston told us, "I'm thinking a lot of bad people are coming through . . . Cartels, gang members, people like that. I know it's not the majority. It's the minority that do that. For instance, there's caravans and people that are coming in in droves. You happen to have more of the bad people coming through." [Andrew Garcia, 33, Democrat, Houston] Similarly, a voter from San Antonio said: "I feel like . . . we just don't want to let everybody in and we don't know what's going on with them or what have they been through. What's their past life?" [Josephine Flores, 33, Democrat, San Antonio] Some of the concerns expressed about criminality and disease seem to reflect negative recent popular discourses about immigration.

Latinos also spoke about the immigration system as being unpredictable and lacking transparency. Several people mentioned that dealing with the immigration system is stressful, frustrating, and uncertain, and that it sometimes feels like a roll of the dice. This massive legal bureaucracy is difficult to understand, and their position in it was similarly confounding as they waded through the system in the process of obtaining their status. Many described harrowing experiences they had attempting to navigate the system. For instance, one woman in Houston described her experience when her ex-husband was deported a second time. Compared to the first experience, when he had been given due process, this time her husband was pulled over, detained, and removed from the country within a matter of days. Her reaction was: "Oh my God, what's going on? What's happening?" She knew "that the immigration laws are getting worse, because back then, when he got deported [the first time] . . . I was actually able to take him his clothes." [Lisa Perez*, 31, Democrat, Houston]. These feelings of frustration and uncertainty seemed to stem from the fact that immigration laws change constantly, and there is no transparency as to when these changes are going to occur, the logic of the changes, or what to expect as a result.

Migrating Legally Should Be Easier

Some Latinos recognize that legally migrating to the United States today is nearly impossible for most people, and far too complex. They talked about the slow and cumbersome process migrants have to go through to be granted legal status. For instance, one voter in Houston complained that, "I'm all for border security, but I think that the process for somebody to become a

citizen is a joke. Let's make it easy. Let's make it easy for them." [Enrique Carbajal, 34, Republican, Houston]. In El Paso, one young Latina said: "I would say there needs to be more regulation, but for individuals who do want to live here, doing it the right way . . . you can't have people [wait] for years and years and years to apply. You're just asking for people to do illegal things." [Andrea Danielle Mata, 20, Independent, El Paso]

One voter in Houston shared a distressing tale of getting lost within the immigration system as a U.S. citizen, which illustrates the relationship between a lack of transparency in the system and the precarious nature of Latino citizenship. This man was born in Texas, but due to family circumstances, lived most of his early years with relatives in Mexico. He shared: "As a person coming from Mexico, even though I was born here, just because I'm a lot darker than most, they gave me hell coming back, even though I had my birth certificate and everything." He was 16 years old when immigration authorities detained him for six months, claiming his birth certificate had been falsified. Nearly lost in the system, "I finally got a hold of my mom. My mom brought my school records, everything. Before I [had] left [for Mexico], I took a picture with the police department, took fingerprints, and that's how they could recognize me, that's how they were able to find out that it was me, through my fingerprints." While in detention, they would wake him up at 4:30 a.m. to eat breakfast, and he said they treated him, "like I was nothing, like I was a nobody." When the entire issue was finally resolved, "They were like, 'We're sorry.' That's what they said. That's it. 'You're free to go.'" One of his lasting impressions from that experience is that he firmly believes immigration, "has to be a fair process." He doesn't expect that everyone be allowed to migrate to the United States, but he said that all immigrants need to be "treated properly" and not be treated "like they're just a piece of paper," or another number in the system, as he was. [Ryan Elizalde, 38, Democrat, Houston]

Still, while many respondents spoke about the need to make legalization faster and easier, most seemed unaware of how the constant changes in immigration laws make applying for legal status extremely difficult for most people. In addition, most people we spoke with did not seem fully aware of how easy it is now to lose one's legal status. They recognize the complexity of the immigration system, but despite their proximity to real-life immigration experiences, even Latinos cannot fully grasp or describe the system's shifting legal intricacies.

A Humane System

Across the board, all Latinos strongly rejected the separation of immigrant parents from their children at the border. Many of them were deeply disturbed by what they had seen, both in the media and some of them personally, and interpreted it as a direct affront to Latinos in particular. For instance, one woman broke into tears as soon as her interview began and she told us, "I'm getting a little emotional . . . It's just that I think that this year, with everything that's happened, I feel that our people should be voting, because it's not right . . . We treat our dogs better than we're treating people that are coming over for a reason, and that bothers me so much." [Monica Vega, 36, Democrat, San Antonio] A similar sentiment was echoed in the values a naturalized citizen in El Paso has tried to teach his children: "We shouldn't have children in cages and we shouldn't be separating families.

I don't believe that we should be paying for them either to stay here. I believe that if they get caught, then we send them back . . . But they shouldn't be put in cages. I've taken my kids to voluntarily make sandwiches for the people that get released back into Mexico. We spent Saturdays making peanut butter jelly sandwiches just so that they can give them." [Salomon Chavira, 44, Republican, El Paso]

Some Latinos we interviewed had developed highly nuanced views on immigration. For example, we spoke with a Houston police officer who articulated a more hybrid perspective on immigration, informed by both his work life and his family's immigration story. He sought to humanize the immigration debate:

"The way I look at it is, there's people that want to come here, there's people that want to have the benefits to this country that they are not going to get somewhere else . . . I think being Hispanic, being Latino, changes my perception of it, as well. As I said, I did come from a family of immigrants . . . You can't just say, we'll shut the border off, we're never going to allow anybody in . . . Let's be open about this, let's figure out a way to get people here that want to be here, that want to be productive members. There's always going to be an element of—I don't think it's an immigrant thing, I think it's just a people thing, right? There's always going to be some element that comes here either legally or illegally that are going to come here to take advantage of the system, take advantage of people. But that's not solely applied to just immigrants. We've got plenty of those people that were born here that do that." [Enrique Carbajal, 34, Republican, Houston]

Neither Party Has a Solution

Latinos in Texas feel that no political party or major candidate fully reflects their perspectives and/or their experiences around immigration. While people we spoke with could not easily articulate or agree on a fuller picture of immigration policy in structural or coherent terms, they nonetheless felt that neither political party has been able or has had the willingness to address all of the key issues. They've grown wary of broken promises from candidates and elected leaders.

To summarize the most prevalent views we heard, Latinos would like an immigration policy solution that includes a combination of humane immigration policies, effective border security, and a simpler, shorter path to legalization, which includes granting legal status to DACA recipients.

Immigration as a Source of Economic Competition

Several Latinos we spoke with expressed anxiety about having to compete with immigrants for jobs and other resources, echoing concerns from other working-class Americans. After all, a common sentiment we heard about what drives immigration is that, "Most of the time, people just want to come up here and work, that's it." [Elvia Lopez*, 36, Republican, San Antonio] These Latinos feel that some immigrants have the skill set and drive to work to put them in direct competition for the same jobs. They feel concerned that they may be at a disadvantage because they have heard stories or had experiences of employers choosing to pay immigrants less to perform the same kind of work.

Those who were most concerned about economic competition with immigrants were mainly younger working-class Latinos.

Consider what one electrician from San Antonio said when he described how the job market works for him: "[Employers] still see us as colors, as all low-ball, pay them low. No, no, no. I can get ten of you for the price of one. You know what I mean? . . . I mean, it's just the way the economy works, to be honest with you. I mean, would you rather, if you were a boss and you headed a company, would you pay me $100, or would you pay five other people $20?" [Fernando Morales, 28, No Affiliation, San Antonio]. Other Latinos spoke about competition from immigrants for other resources, such as scholarships for college, spots in kindergarten classes for their children, or even food assistance. But it is notable that even among those who spoke about immigration in terms of competition, they also spoke about immigrants' right to search for a better life.

Several people across the political spectrum also expressed more general feelings of ambivalence about immigration. Some believe that the country should protect the safety net for truly needy Americans before helping immigrants, including the poor, the elderly, and the homeless. Others expressed concern that some immigrants come to the United States with a sense of entitlement and want things to be handed to them. These types of conversations often involved Latinos speaking about other Latino ethnicities, such as Mexican Americans complaining about newer Central American immigrants.

Immigration Is Aspirational

Yet, regardless of political persuasion, and even among those who were critical of immigration, most Latinos still think of it in aspirational terms. In narrating their own migration journeys, they associated immigration with opportunity, hard work, sacrifice, and searching for a better future. Their stories don't reduce the motivation behind migration to economic hardship, but speak of aspiration in terms of future expectations rooted in long-standing values. Most Latinos believe that those impulses among people cannot be stopped, even with stronger border policies. Many feel proud of how far they and their families have come since they first migrated.

> *"I mean, if it was up to me, these people would be . . . if they were working, they should still be able to stay here. If you're working and paying taxes and not living off the government, absolutely. You're contributing to the country. You're contributing to the workforce . . . The one thing that makes me proud to say my last name is at least of Hispanic origin is that the people that are coming here to work, they work—they work hard."*
>
> Robert Trujillo*, 45,
> Republican, Rio Grande Valley

For example, consider how this woman from Houston described her immigrant family's struggle and vitality:

"My mom and my father were never legally married, so there was no way that she could fix his papers. So, he fixed [them] on his own, and then from there . . . all his brothers . . . I have a lot of uncles that are here, too. I have all my uncles here, and then his one sister, she lives in California also. So, they're all U.S. citizens now. That's why I'm very proud of my family that comes from Mexico, because I've seen that we've come a very long way, from nothing to . . . they have everything that they could possibly want and need for their families. Do you know what I mean? And I'm actually . . . not to put my mom's side of the family down, like them being from here, it's just that . . . my family from my dad's side, they've gone through so much, and didn't have everything handed to them, and they have a right to be in the States." [Lisa Perez*, 31, Democrat, Houston]

These family immigration stories are deeply meaningful to many Latinos. Even among those who face unclear prospects for the future, they still reflect with pride on these stories of the immigrant's struggle, and how their sense of hope persists today.

Lack of Simple Solutions

Latino opinions on immigration policy are a prominent example of the complexity of Latino political perspectives. The people we spoke with frequently expressed that some degree of immigration and border restriction was likely a pragmatic necessity, while a deeper, unaddressed problem is how to clarify and simplify the pathway to citizenship and/or legal residency. In short, Latinos in Texas have a nuanced perspective based on their own experiences with immigration, as well as the experiences of their family, friends, neighbors, and peers. They are arguably caught in the midst of a partisan conflict, in which the public conversation is diluted and each party has moved further towards opposing poles. In comparison to other ethnic groups, Latinos' proximity to the reality of immigration may place them in a position that does not easily align with popularly available policy directions.

IMPLICATIONS:

Lived Experience Versus Legal Frameworks

While Latinos overall favor immigration, they do not speak the policy language that either of the political parties do, and especially the language spoken during the primary season. As we discussed, Latinos have a direct and a historic experience with immigration, which seems to be the reason why many of their views tend to be pragmatic. But at the same time, most Latinos do not fully understand the policies and laws that govern the immigration system. They struggle to keep track of an immigration system that is highly complex and constantly changing.

Explaining the Merits of Immigration Proposals

It is important not to assume that Latinos will automatically embrace either party's positions on immigration because they are more or less favorable. Whether they will embrace them may depend on how much Latinos understand the merits of those policy positions. Investing the time to describe the complexities of the immigration system to Latino voters and the

impact of different policy proposals is important. Doing so in ways that people can relate to is critical, because the language of bureaucracy and legal policy is often quite challenging for most people to follow clearly. As we see it, the missing communication link is explaining how policies relate directly to Latinos, and to their family and friends. Using personal stories or testimonies is perhaps the best approach. But we would caution against only using personal stories that support one policy position, because many Latinos are familiar with various immigration policies and have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly. Even taking policy positions that are critical of current immigration policies and frameworks need to celebrate immigration victories, because those stories are a great source of familial and cultural pride.

In our conversations with Latinos, we heard many of them repeat uncritically the discourses of controlled migration without really understanding the intricacies of the laws. It is possible that Latino voters might agree with policy proposals different from their own ideas if they had a better understanding of what specific changes and reforms could make the immigration system more transparent and more just, in better alignment with the principles and values they expressed.

> *"There's been times where I tried to go out and get the help and then I couldn't receive it because there's already people that are illegals and they were here first. They get the help first, even though they're not American."*
>
> Josephine Flores, 33,
> Democrat, San Antonio

Endnotes

1 See, for example: Leo R. Chavez, The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

7. LOCAL, STATE VS. NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

Throughout our interviews, a consistent theme emerged around participants' uneven engagement with national, state, and local politics. Put simply, people struggle to find the mental bandwidth to understand and truly care about all levels of politics equally. As a result, presidential and national politics consume most people because of their prominent and dramatic storylines, as they are portrayed and consumed in the media. Local politics tend to be secondary to many voters, especially younger ones, though the more consistent, informed voters recognize their critical importance and how their vote can have a bigger influence at the local level. Meanwhile, state politics is largely ignored, often in alarming ways.

Our interviewees explained the point best, and here we highlight two salient themes that emerged.

The first is that national politics gets plenty of attention, but it's easier to forget about local and state politics and elections:

"Yes, I vote in all of the midterms and presidential elections. The only things that I sometimes don't vote in are city council, if I forget, or the school board bond elections and those things . . . I guess [I am] a little bit less connected and also forgetting sometimes. [When the election passes] I'll be like, 'Oh, yeah' [laughs]. If I don't do early voting, then I tend not to [vote] with little stuff, just because it's a pain sometimes, just looking up polling information, or not being able to just get wherever in the city and vote, like with early voting." [Robert Cuellar*, 45, Democrat, San Antonio]

> *"Maybe it's just the influx of information these days, because media will cover more national. You hear that coming in, and then local, that's just your community, that's right up front, walking out of your door every day. I think to follow state politics, you have to be more intentional to seek out what's going on."*
>
> Michelle Cano, 38, Independent, Rio Grande Valley

The second is that most people have to learn about why local and state politics are important, as it's not obvious to them:

"At 49 [years old], I can tell you that I consider many of [the elections] equally important. Maybe at 25, 30 [years old], maybe not so. Maybe I paid more attention to the national races back then, and now, I've learned over time that the impact that the local elections can have on us is just as great as the national office elections." [Alvaro Garcia, 49, Independent, Houston]

INSIGHT:

Latino voters engage more closely with national politics, in comparison with local politics, which only more regular voters pay attention to. State politics are widely ignored, and few know who represents them or understand the issues that are legislated at the state level.

National Politics Are Easiest to Engage

Most Latinos, including both voters and nonvoters, tend to prioritize engagement with presidential elections, presidential politics, and national policies or politics first. This is largely because national politics is what they hear and read most about in the media and social media.

Most voters we spoke with had an easier time following national politics, and many acknowledged that this was a result of the national media outlets they pay attention to. As one voter put it: "I think what I pay attention to more is what's brought up in the media more, the issues that are always being presented for the presidential election . . . I don't look at every single topic or every single bill. The only thing I look at is what's being filtered to me through what I watch on TV." [Enrique Carbajal, 34, Republican, Houston]

Less Attention Locally, But More Positive Views

On the whole, Texas Latinos are less engaged with local politics, though many people reflected on the value of local political engagement. They also seemed to recognize that their vote in local elections carried a bigger weight due to the smaller size of the electorate. Many could name key local politicians and cited relevant local political issues at stake in their communities. One voter said, "I do follow more local than, let's say, national, because, I mean, this is what affects me and my community. Because a lot of the stuff that happens nationally really doesn't affect me as what happens here in my city does . . . I feel like, let's say, my vote is not going to count as much when I do it nationally for the president, as it counts when we go out and vote for our mayor." [Claudia Perez, 36, No Affiliation, Houston]

Another voter who volunteers with political campaigns explained how, with fewer people voting in local elections and a smaller pool of voters than in state or national elections, local politics is easier for people to influence. The subtext of this was that the opposite was true with national politics: "A lot of times, people will say, 'The same people get elected. It doesn't matter.' But especially for the local elections . . . when you only have seven to nine percent of people voting, that means your vote counts even more. Your vote is like the equivalent of multiple votes . . . People are like, 'Really? That few people vote?' Their vote matters more. Because I think when you're looking at a presidential election, people get that attitude that their vote doesn't matter." [Adriana Colon, 45, Democrat, Dallas]

Local politics appear to gain significance for many voters as they get older, begin families, have children, send those children to school, and engage with more community and neighborhood activities, from using local parks to worrying about trash and recycling. While there is no blanket age at which Latinos become conscious of the ramifications of local politics, we certainly discovered that a growing awareness arrives over time and with age.

One voter explained how she developed her interest in local politics as she grew older, but also learned that local politics requires more frequent and habitual engagement: "At first, I was always presidential, only the presidentials. I would follow the presidentials and then once our president was in, that was that. Then once the four-year term comes up again, I kind of want to know what's going on. But within our community, you can't let four years, eight years go by and not know what's going on, you know?" [Josephine Flores, 33, Democrat, San Antonio]

State Politics Alarmingly Misunderstood and Ignored

While the relatively low level of engagement with local politics vis-à-vis national politics is concerning, and there is a need and an opportunity to grow that engagement, we found that state politics is a far more acute problem. There are at least two reasons for this. First, Texas state politics receives far less attention from local media outlets and nearly no attention from national media outlets. As a result, most people are unaware of what is happening in state politics and lack the language to discuss or more deeply engage with those policy issues.

Secondly, few people seem to fully understand the specific power and jurisdiction of state officials, as compared with national politics or with local politics at the city and county level. In short, most people don't really know what state government does, or how its actions directly impact their life. Even a more informed, regular voter explained: "I'll still put my vote in, but I don't think a lot of it has to do with what we're doing [locally] . . . Because I mean, that's just more of how the funds are given." [Claudia Perez, 36, No Affiliation, Houston]

Most voters we spoke with could scarcely recall how they have been voting in state politics, especially outside of the governor's race. For example, one voter knew all about her local politics, but when we pressed her about state politics, she realized that she didn't have much to say. She explained: "I would follow a little bit of the state [politics], but not as much. I voted for the governor. I don't remember who I voted for governor . . . I probably don't think much about state politics as I probably should, but local and national I'm more aware of." [Michelle Cano*, 38, Independent, Rio Grande Valley]

Texas Latinos are not likely to know and understand state policies that affect them or their families and friends directly. For example, almost no one we interviewed mentioned Texas Senate Bill 4, which was signed into law in May 2017. SB4 is a law that effectively bans sanctuary cities in Texas and requires local government and law enforcement agencies to cooperate with federal immigration officers, making it a Class A misdemeanor if they refuse. It also allows police officers to check the immigration status of those they detain if they choose. Despite the high media attention the bill received, we did not hear anyone reflecting on this or similar state policies.

Most Don't Know Their Representatives

Especially on the local and state levels, it was not common for our voting or nonvoting participants to know who represents them. This seems to be a function of the sheer number of levels of government and representatives, many of whom are constantly changing. And again, it also seems related to the media's focus on a small handful of key political players, while most other layers of government receive less attention. Our interviewees tended to know the president, their congressional representative, governor, mayor, and perhaps one or more city councilperson. But at the state level, very few knew either their state senator or their state representative, nor did they understand their jurisdiction and responsibilities.

IMPLICATIONS:

Radically Rethinking Civics Education

Is "more education" the solution? Civics education is low among all Americans. For most people we spoke with, high school government classes didn't make a lasting impression. Some found educational reinforcement elsewhere—in college, in the workplace, or through an organization they joined—or they learned about politics and government on their own, doing research and following the news. The exception seemed to be those individuals who learned a great deal about how the government works by going through the citizenship naturalization process. This may help explain why there is a higher voter turnout among naturalized citizens, compared to native-born citizens.

But the important implication is that we need to radically rethink civics education for the 21st century, because the current education system and media are failing us in this regard. Busy adults with families, jobs, and social lives don't have the time to be lectured to. Yet they still need civics education. Our research shows that we need to rethink what civics education is and how and when it gets imparted, so that citizens can acquire a better understanding of how elected leaders at various levels and their policies directly shape their lives. Among Latinos, we need to also ask how social and cultural networks and practices can be utilized for the purpose of civics education, and how other players outside of the traditional political sphere—for example, cultural arts centers—can envision and play new roles in advancing civic engagement.

More Information Needed

Our interviewees raised important questions to us that are largely left unspoken or unresolved among voters: Where can they reliably learn more about local and state issues, policies, and elected leaders? Where should they go to learn more about the candidates and the offices they are running for? This is where community and political organizations can play a crucial role in providing better election "primers" that explain not just candidates' positions and background, but the responsibilities of the office they're running for, and how decisions made there directly affect people's lives.

The lack of information about offices and layers of government also point to the deficits of media coverage. One key takeaway is that the media fails to communicate all of the issues that are at stake for voters in general, and for Latinos in particular. This isn't a critique of their

coverage per se, as it is an acknowledgment that its scope is necessarily limited. Also, media consumers struggle to absorb all the media's political stories, much less synthesize them into a coherent picture. Public institutions, community organizations and media must all work collaboratively to reimagine and strategize around a better civics education.

Helping Voters Make Sense Of It All

Related to this point, there are limits to how much information one person can consume, absorb, and make sense of in order to be a well-informed voter. Especially for local and state elections, voting requires a great deal of research to understand the different offices, their respective jurisdictions, and where candidates stand on various policy issues, as well as who is best qualified to do the job well. The further we dug into these challenges with people, including many dedicated voters, the more we heard concerns and requests for support. Voters are looking for pathways to make this work of self-education easier, including ways of receiving nonpartisan and unbiased information that allows them take more control over their voting decisions and process.

> *"I tell people . . . especially the local government, they control so many things. I've given examples of things you're complaining about. Your trash, [to] pick up old trash. You complaining about code violations, the local elections, the mayor's office, the city council, those who deal with these issues. If you vote [locally], your vote counts. I think we actually have a number on point. It's like the equivalent of six votes basically because so few people vote."*
>
> Adriana Colon, 45,
> Democrat, Dallas

8. LATINO REPRESENTATION AND POLITICAL INCORPORATION

Latinos account for nearly 40 percent of the Texas population of Texas, and by mid-2021, they are projected to become the largest ethnic group in the state, outnumbering Whites for the first time.[1,2] Nationally, Latinos are expected to be the largest group of nonwhite eligible voters in the 2020 presidential election.[3] But these demographic realities are not reflected in political representation, at either the national, state, and some local levels.

Although the 116th Congress that meets through January 2021 features the largest class of Latinos in history, only 8.7 percent of the House of Representatives, or 38 members, are Latino, and only four of 100 Senators are Latino.[4] Of the 36-member House delegation from Texas, only six are Latinos, two of them women.[5] In 2018, for the first time in history, Texas voters sent Latina representatives to Congress: U.S. Rep. Veronica Escobar of El Paso and U.S. Rep. Sylvia R. Garcia of Houston.[6]

Similarly, at the state level, the Texas Legislature is far less diverse than the state as whole. It remains mostly white and mostly male. Of a total of 150 House representatives, only 34, or 22.7 percent, are Latino.[7]

Even though most Latino voters we spoke with are not aware of these statistics, at a basic level, they understood this failure of representation by race and ethnicity, and strongly expressed the need to be meaningfully incorporated in the political system. By incorporation, we refer to having Latinos' experiences, interests, and perspectives matter and have weight in the political decisions that directly affect them. Our interviews revealed that Latinos feel that party leaders, political candidates and elected officials do not listen to them. The Texas Latinos we interviewed don't just want equal representation, in terms of numbers—they seek to be seen, heard, and fully incorporated at all levels of government and the political system, and in American society more broadly.

> *"I think, for us, at a local level, we're well represented. I will say though that at the state level, it's getting there. It's getting a little bit better. At the national level, though, not really . . . you don't really see a lot of them."*
>
> Enrique Carbajal, 34, Republican, Houston

INSIGHT:

Texas Latinos seek meaningful incorporation into a political system that sees them, listens to them, and responds to their needs. Incorporation does not just mean electing more Latinos, but having people in power who understand their diverse experiences and advocate for their interests.

Not Enough Latino Candidates or Leaders

We found that while few Latino voters say they wholeheartedly prefer Latino candidates and elected leaders over anyone else, the vast majority of them acknowledge that there are not enough of them in politics, particularly at the state and national levels. However, most voters claim that the ethnic background of a political candidate would not determine who they vote for. They told us that the candidate's stance on the issues is more important than whether she or he is Latino or not. Still, many of them acknowledge feeling more kinship with or curiosity in Latino candidates, especially those who shared a similar life story or socioeconomic background as them. One voter said, "If you're Hispanic but you were raised with White people, with all these privileges, well, how Hispanic are you, or how Latino are you? Because you don't know their struggles." [Claudia Perez, 36, No Affiliation, Houston]

For the minority of Latino voters who did say that having a Latino candidate matters deeply to them, they talked about it as being inspiring and symbolic. As one voter put it, "when we get a Latino in office, that will show other Latinos, 'Hey, if he does it, we all can do it.'" [Peter Anthony Guzman, 28, Democrat, San Antonio] Another young voter spoke about the effect of watching Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez get elected to Congress: "She came out of, I think, New York or Chicago . . . That was so cool, you know what I mean? I saw it. Even seeing the documentary on Netflix about her was so inspirational. Me and my friends, we all got together and we had a movie party to watch it." [Jose Luis Perez Jr., 24, No Affiliation, El Paso]

After speaking with more than 100 people, we came to the realization that the historical lack of political incorporation at the state and national levels, both in numbers and in influence, has resulted in Texas Latinos not having a clear idea of what fair representation would look like. Consequently, one should not be surprised if the majority of Latinos, when asked about Latino candidates, cannot envision the possibility of having them in the highest positions in government, much less the presidency. Tellingly, almost no one spoke about how much it would mean to them to have a Latino or Latina president, even though they spoke about being inspired by Latino leaders and by the election of Barack Obama, the first Black president.

National vs. State and Local Representation

As discussed elsewhere in this report, most Latinos tend to engage with presidential candidates and presidential politics first, largely because during election season, it's what they most read and hear about. (See Chapter 2, Section 7, Local, State vs. National Government) Given the focus of media coverage and the disparity in money spent in national, state, and local elections, they tend to be more aware of national politics and less aware of state and local politics. When we asked them, very few Latinos knew who represented them at the state level. Even fewer were aware of what gets decided by state leaders, and consequently they do not participate in those elections. They thus were also less aware of whether Latinos are proportionally and/or meaningfully represented in state government.

We did find more engagement with local politics among those who voted more regularly.

And especially in San Antonio, El Paso, and the Rio Grande Valley, the Latinos we interviewed felt that representation was better at the local level. However, having more Latinos in office in those cities and counties can potentially obscure the fact that power relations may still remain imbalanced, and that Latino leaders may or may not bring about better outcomes. In other words, higher numeral representation of Latinos can create something of a blind spot, in terms of whether that representation is actually improving conditions for Latinos in those jurisdictions.

Meaningful Incorporation and Representation

Beyond having more Latinos elected to office, participants expressed concern over whether political candidates and leaders—Latino or not—could look beyond Latino stereotypes and truly understand their needs. Put differently, Latinos would like to be more fully and meaningfully incorporated into the political system. They want to feel they are being genuinely represented, which in their view, is not happening enough now.

This sense of meaningful incorporation needs to move beyond having leaders address policy issues that are important to Latinos, but also to connect and speak to the lack of belonging that Latinos feel, particularly in American politics. One voter who is an educator told us, "I think they're just making assumptions, 'I think this is what [Latinos] want.' But they've never really been surrounded in a neighborhood or in an area that is primarily Latino, as to know what their life really consists of, and what they really need . . . I think a lot of it is just stereotypes, actually. What they have is just this basic set of stereotypes [about Latinos]." When asked if he felt that politicians speak to what matters to him, he said:

> *"I feel like there's not enough of us . . . I have to go through and research [the candidates] and see. Just because they're Hispanic doesn't mean that they're going to get my vote in the primary, because they might have some positions that I disagree with."*
>
> Robert Cuellar*, 45,
> Democrat, San Antonio

"No, because I don't think, unless they interact with you . . . I don't think they are going to understand. I think what they say is, 'Yes, [Latinos] have a hard path. They struggle with making payments.' [But they don't understand] because they'll never struggle, because they've never really gone to bed without eating." [Oscar J. Nuñez Martinez, 33, Democrat, El Paso]

This desire for meaningful representation and incorporation by politicians came through clearly in many of our interviews, although participants articulated it in different ways. Several talked about how their daily struggles never seemed to be a central part of political discourse. And because of this disconnect, most Latino voters could not directly relate their lives to specific state or national policies.

Campaign Outreach

Despite all the outreach activity by political campaigns—including canvassing door-to-door, sending emails and mailers, and running phone banks—the majority of Latinos we spoke with said they had not been contacted by campaigns

through any of those means. Furthermore, many of them said they had never spoken to a politician in person. The ones who spoke about being contacted were the ones who vote regularly or who live in middle-class political districts. Among the rest, no one seemed to be making an effort to bring them into conversation for the first time. The most engaged voters instead sought information about political candidates and campaigns by talking to peers and doing online research. Those with lower levels of interest in politics typically learned about candidates through television news and social media.

Speaking Spanish

For the voters we spoke with, a candidate's ability to speak Spanish, whether the candidate was Latino or not, was variously seen as a nice and helpful gesture or as pandering. Speaking Spanish was a fine line. Most Latino voters are English speakers, and few said they needed a candidate or an elected official to speak Spanish in order to be able to relate to them. However, some Latino voters did interpret political leaders' efforts to communicate in Spanish as a potential way to show that Latinos matter to them, and that they are genuinely interested in creating dialogue with them. One voter said, "I really feel that Spanish is important, because that's where you can—I feel like if a candidate took the time to learn Spanish, then he really wants to go out there and basically interact with that community. But if I'm only learning Spanish because I really need your vote . . . I feel that I don't really matter to you." [Oscar J. Nuñez Martinez, 33, Democrat, El Paso]

Politics and Belonging

Latinos recognize that their lack of political incorporation is largely due to larger inequalities of power around race and ethnicity in the United States, that then play out in representative political bodies. To them, these bodies of government look and feel racially and ethnically distant and unrelatable. For instance, one Houston voter, a police officer, observed that, "with the exception of 'the squad' . . . it looks like it's a bunch of old white men and women [in Congress]." [Enrique Carbajal, 34, Republican, Houston] Similarly, when asked if Latinos are fairly represented in government, a college student we interviewed said, "No, not in anything . . . a lot of white people in state and national politics . . . I think it's a really big issue." [Andrea Danielle Mata, 20, Independent, El Paso] These voters are aware that not having fair representation in politics at the state and national level has real consequences, in terms of having Latinos participate in the policymaking process. As a result, they feel, Latino priorities and interests remain unaddressed.

There were some Latino voters who talked about the problem of political representation as an extension of a larger problem of belonging and incorporation throughout American culture and society. To them, Latinos are not fairly represented in politics just as they are not fairly represented in science, business, the academy, entertainment, and more. One young voter told us, "We need more people in college. We need more people getting higher education . . . executive positions, more CEOs, more stem cells, more tech. Just different positions that we're not equally represented [in] at all. If we look at even medicine, the number of doctors that are either Hispanic or Latinos, you're looking at double minority there . . . very small." He went on to say that, "as long as we're not viewed as equals, I think it's going to be very difficult for other people to appreciate and accept, and vote

and rationalize towards [our] perspective . . . the white man [is still] controlling the power. They're still the bosses, they're still the business owners, they're still the ones in government, they're still the ones making all the laws." [Benito Moriel, 33, Democrat, Dallas]

Strength and Health of Our Democracy

Many people we spoke with consider the United States an imperfect democracy. It's not that they do not believe in the ideal of democracy—the vast majority do. It's that they can recognize the problems that stand in the way of having a real democratic system. Some of the factors they said are hindering democracy included the electoral college, gerrymandering, the influence of money on politics, the two-party system, voter suppression, poverty, and general social and economic marginality.

Unfortunately, some of those Latinos have come to see these issues as insurmountable, and this has led to feelings of alienation and a lack of commitment to or engagement with political processes in general. For example, a woman who canvasses in Houston described the damper the electoral college puts on her ability to convince people to vote: "Many times, when I've worked on [GOTV] campaigns at the municipal or state level since 2016, the people tell me, 'I don't think I'm going to vote.' And I ask them, 'Why?' [They say] 'what good did it do that we went out to vote en masse? What good did it do that Hillary won with two million, or almost three million votes, if in the end, the other candidate won?" [Angelica Garcia, 66, Democrat, Houston]. Multiple people we spoke with echoed these sentiments about the electoral college, calling it undemocratic.

> *"I just feel like there's not enough Hispanics in office. I have [voted for a candidate because of her ethnicity]. I did that one year. I didn't know who the person was sometimes, and I still voted for them. Why? Because they were a woman and they were Hispanic. And I don't know if that was right or wrong, but at that time I felt like that's what I needed to do, so I did it."*
>
> Michelle Cano*, 38,
> Independent, Rio Grande Valley

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9. HOW LATINOS VIEW THE 2020 ELECTION

No one knows the future, but everyone thinks about it and has a perspective on it. Future visions are seen through a cultural lens, and only make sense within our current political, economic, and social context. With that in mind, we talked to Latinos about their views of the 2020 election and beyond, including their hopes and concerns for their future, and the future of their communities and the country.

In short, Latinos in Texas expect a highly consequential 2020 election, with a lot at stake. The majority of Latinos feel that this election is extremely important.

The most challenging aspect of this analysis is understanding the relationship between attitudes toward the future of the country and how these feelings might impact present behaviors, including voting and political engagement. There are strong sentiments about the upcoming election from all positions on the political spectrum. And most people we interviewed said that they planned to vote in 2020, with the exception of the most habitual nonvoters. However, we also heard many attitudes about the future that were not only negative, but also pessimistic, and in a few cases, even fatalistic. Because we have no comparative data from the past, we cannot say how those attitudes have changed over time—in other words, whether they have become more or less pessimistic—or how exactly they will or will not translate to voting and civic engagement in this election cycle, beyond what people told us they planned to do. However, there was a general sense with most Texas Latinos we interviewed that this moment in history is uniquely important.

> *"I don't think we're going to be a top power anymore. I don't think so . . . I think it needs to be, 'We're the United States, a place where immigrants come.' You know what I mean? Dreams happen. That's not true anymore, so I think we need to go back to that . . . where the common man, anyone who wants to make a living and live a good life, can come and live life here."*
>
> Jose Luis Perez Jr., 24,
> No Affiliation, El Paso

All of our initial interviews were completed months prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Yet the tone of some of the interviews seemed to foretell that there were even harder times ahead. A number of participants said that we were "headed toward darker times" or that "I feel like the world is really going to shit in every aspect." One person even said: "I feel like the world is coming to an end, or will come to an end eventually. I don't see, collectively, the entire world coming to a better place." While no one explicitly predicted the pandemic, the sense of foreboding was astonishing in many ways, in light of what was to come. The question remains of whether this will galvanize more people to vote or deepen their sense of powerlessness. It's likely that both things could happen for different groups of Latinos. (See Chapter 3, Amid the Pandemic: COVID-19, Government Response, and the 2020 Election.)

INSIGHT:

Latinos across the political spectrum recognize the 2020 presidential election as a potential turning point for the future of the country. In general, Latinos are remarkably pessimistic about the direction the country is going in, in relation to specific policy issues, but also to what they perceive as an environment of increasing conflict, hate, and division.

Is 2020 a Different Election?

For most Latinos, this feels like a uniquely different, even historic election. It is not just about potentially changing presidents or preserving or shifting the balance of power between political parties. To them, the election is also about their future and how they imagine their future, their well-being and their ability to prosper.

Latinos across the political spectrum reflected on their fears, vulnerabilities, and hopes, encompassing a very wide range of emotions. A few people spoke of the election as a referendum on American democracy and principles, but more frequently, the election was about more tangible policy-related issues that impact Latino lives, including immigration, health care, jobs and the economy, racism, gun violence, and student loan debt.

Generally, most Latino voters in our study said that they intended to vote in the 2020 election, including many of those who did not vote in 2016 but felt the stakes had increased. Some of the 2016 nonvoters expressed regret and disbelief for not having voted in what they now felt had been an unusually consequential election.

What Does The Future Hold?

Generally speaking, Latinos still believe that the United States is a place where dreams can happen and where hard work is rewarded. But in the present moment, they do not feel overly optimistic. They believe the country faces serious economic, political, and social challenges, and that a lot is at stake in 2020. There is more pessimism than optimism among Latinos about both their own future and the future of the country.

Quite a few people we interviewed felt that things are bad, and only seem to be getting worse. For example, one voter said: “I don't want to curse, but I feel like the world is really going to shit in every aspect . . . I was talking about this yesterday with a friend, I was telling her that I feel like at a certain point, the world is just going to be, like, burning.” [Alba Flores, 30, Democrat, Rio Grande Valley] Another person told us, “[Do you] remember the Archie Bunker show? When he used to sing that song, ‘when things were good’? Maybe we thought things were bad way back then, but I think they’re worse now.” [Jaime Cordero, 62, Democrat, Rio Grande Valley]

However, among those who spoke more pessimistically, we also heard from a sizable group that could detect a silver lining and still held on to hope for the future. More of these individuals resided in Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio, and their optimism was possibly fueled by bigger-city economies where there is more

social and economic opportunity and mobility than along the U.S.-Mexico border, in El Paso or the Rio Grande Valley (again, prior to the pandemic). As one voter said, “I hope there's a light at the end of the darkness. I feel that right now, we are at a very dark point, and I feel that . . . there’s hope, especially with these [2020] candidates.” [Monica Vega, 36, Democrat, San Antonio] Another told us:

“It’s like the saying, we have to go through a thunderstorm before we see the sunny day, with the rainbow. We’re, right now, having a thunderstorm and everything, so we’re almost there. We're almost going to see the rainbow and the sunny day. It's going to get here. It's going to be beautiful and everything. We're all just going to have our peace. We're all going to have our equal rights. We're all just going to have love back, because that's what's been missing for a long time already. There's been a lot of disrespect, a lot of not equal-ness and a lot of bullying going on . . . It’ll get better. It has to, one day.” [Celeste M. Garcia, 21, Independent, Houston]

While the majority of Latinos expressed pessimism, there were also people who held a more optimistic outlook, without the foreboding. One person told us, “I think [the country is] fine. It's going to get better but it takes time . . . It's taking time to make changes.” [Rick Fuentes, 59, Republican, Dallas] And optimism about the country’s future was not just coming from those who did feel the government and its leaders are moving the country in the right directions. Some Latinos we spoke with felt good about the partisan debates between the left and the right, which they believe strengthens our democracy. As those individuals see it, both sides have valid points to make, and good ideas for the future can come from anywhere. In the end, most optimists we interviewed believe America is headed on the right path.

What was less clear from hearing future outlooks was exactly how people’s current orientation might impact their political behaviors in the near future, including voting. For some of them, the pessimism feels insurmountable, and could prevent them from feeling empowered enough to vote. As one person who doubted the impact of her vote said: “I think my heart doesn't want to give up, but reality is very bleak. I think that there's hope, but I am definitely very jaded in [regards to] the solution, as far as our political system. The government, we can’t trust them. They're not going to work hard enough to solve these really important problems that a lot of people have.” [Victoria Garza, 30, No Affiliation, Rio Grande Valley]

But we also heard from others who feel similarly, yet are turning that pessimism into a call for change, particularly through the ballot box: “Hopefully [the country is going] to see better days, because right now, no. Right now I would say not nowhere good . . . So, I just hope and pray for the best . . . [My hope for my community is] just to go vote. To go vote.” [Lisa Perez*, 31, Democrat, Houston]

Will Racism in America Persist, Grow or Diminish?

For many Latinos, their pessimism was not just tied to politics and the upcoming election, but also to feelings and fears about what they perceive as growing levels of division and hatred. While this was often something they articulated indirectly, many Latinos spoke to how racism impacts their lives and shapes their future perspectives in negative ways. More than a few talked about an environment of "hate" that they find prevalent in the country today.

And, in their final reflections on the nation's future, many echoed sentiments about Americans needing to come together and work as one. Clearly, their persistent concerns about division and divisiveness spoke in part to their recognition that Latinos generally don't feel as strong a sense of belonging in the United States. For example, one person said, "I just think as a community, we should just come together and help each other better the community, our city . . . by helping each other." [Theresa Dominguez, 27, No Affiliation, Houston] Another made a similar claim, that, "We all want peace . . . Yes, and respect. We all want respect. I want respect for myself. I think we're creating a country where people are just mad. There's mad people or angry people. It's building more division, discrimination. It's sad, but it's real." [Veronica Juarez, 37, Republican, Houston] And at the same time, several explained these feelings of division and not belonging as resulting from racism, specifically: "Where we are heading right now, I don't know. It's scary. It's scary out there . . . You're facing more racism right now than we ever did back in the day. A lot of hate crime . . . it's scary, yes. As for me, for myself, I'm not fearful. But to have my family out there and not be [able] to protect them right, then yes, it's fearful." [Fernando Morales, 28, No Affiliation, San Antonio]

IMPLICATIONS:

Leadership Qualities Latinos Seek for the Future

When we asked Texas Latinos what they hoped to see in future leaders and elected officials, we heard a fairly consistent set of answers, regardless of partisan leaning. First, many talked about wanting a president who can unify people, and someone who is inclusive. They want political leadership that considers the needs and interests of all people in the country, rather than prioritizing particular constituencies or using divisiveness to further their own political agendas. Secondly, they want their leaders to address the key policy issues that most matter to them, including: jobs, the economy, health care, education, and immigration, with individuals split on advocating for more gun safety versus protecting gun rights. And third, while it's not crucial for leaders to be Latino or speak Spanish, they want political candidates and leaders to explicitly address Latinos and address their unique challenges, while also understanding that Latinos are not all the same and do not share the same views or interests. With leadership like this, many Latinos we spoke with would likely feel both a greater sense of belonging, as well as a more optimistic view of government's capacity to improve their lives. It would also reinforce a belief that their vote matters.

Where Optimism Grows

Latinos in Texas hope to see change in government and in the country, and prefer changes that align with their moral principles. They want a future where their own understanding of democratic principles are embodied and emulated by their leaders. Many Latinos we interviewed had high ideals and hope for a future where there is less division and hate, and a future where elected officials care about everybody and the government treats all people with fairness and respect. Reflecting a common opinion among Latinos about the outcome of the 2020 election, one voter said: "I feel like [things] should change, that's my hope. That we'll have some change that is positive for all communities. And that they're able to see the worth and value in all people." [Emilia Alvarez Gamboa, 35, Independent, Rio Grande Valley].

> *"I had a conversation with [my son] yesterday. He's 11. He's going to be in the sixth grade. I told him, 'Son, you're about to be a sixth-grader, and things are going to start getting a little more difficult for you. But I want you to remember who you are. My biggest concern for him is, what issues are we going to have that I can't protect him from?"*
>
> Enrique Carbajal, 34, Republican, Houston

10. TWO CASE STUDIES: SAN ANTONIO AND THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

The previous insights describe views and behaviors consistent across the five regions we studied. In two of those regions, however, there were unique themes that persistently emerged in our interviews, suggesting problems or challenges particular to those places. In the Rio Grande Valley, those challenges relate to the local political culture and practices that discourage widespread participation or faith in the political system. In San Antonio, they have to do with an entrenched history of racial, social, and economic disenfranchisement of Latinos that we believe spills over into whether they feel civically empowered and that political participation can make a difference in their lives.

Both of these regions have low rates of voter turnout among Latinos, despite having majority-Latino populations and a significant number of Latinas and Latinos serving in local, state, and federal elected offices. This suggests that having Latino representatives and a strong demographic presence does not in and of itself guarantee higher civic engagement and empowerment.

While what we observed in each region points to distinctly different patterns and factors, it seems to us that the resulting side effect on Latino political participation is similar: We identified a kind of moral damage, a deeper, generalized public distrust that affects the way Latinos in both regions relate to politics and government. Improving political agency and voter turnout in San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley would require more than the suggestions we've made throughout this report, relating to civics education and the development of habits and communities of voting. In conjunction with these activities, there are larger historical and systemic problems that must be properly understood and addressed. But this also presents an opportunity to foster critical awareness among Latinos, in order to empower them to make bolder demands from their governments that might address these longstanding challenges.

These complex conditions warrant further research, but here, we explore some of the salient themes and the way people spoke so poignantly to them.

CASE STUDY #1: SAN ANTONIO

INSIGHT:

A long history of racial and economic segregation of Latinos in San Antonio produced deep intergenerational disempowerment that still shapes how people relate to politics today.

Educational Discrimination

Multiple San Antonio Latinos we interviewed spoke to us emotionally about their experiences of discrimination at school, historically and recently. These individuals recalled the ways their

gender and ethnicity played a role in how they were treated by teachers and peers at school. Through these racialized interactions, Latinos learned not only what was (or rather wasn't) expected of them, but also received implicit messages about their place in the world. For Jamie Martinez, currently employed as a social worker in the South Side neighborhood where she grew up and attended school, there was a particularly painful experience that happened during her junior year of high school:

"In high school, I was very concerned about my academics, always, and I worked. I worked at Bill Miller [Bar-B-Q]. My junior year, I was already trying to build my college packet to make it, like, I do volunteer hours . . . I graduated number 11 in my class, out of 400 kids. I didn't get into [National Honor Society], and a teacher was on the board. I was very upset that I didn't get into NHS. My English teacher was like, 'You didn't get in, not because of your academics, but because somebody on the committee doesn't like who you hang around with.' I was like, 'What? Whom?' She was like, 'It's somebody from the softball team.' I automatically knew that it was my friend, Christy, who grew up on the West Side and she was in the law and research program too. But she was, what you call, lazy. They're smart, but they don't have anybody to push them, so they just do the bare minimum to get by, and that was her . . . [my teacher] was like, 'You can try next year.' By then, I was like, 'Why am I going to want to be a part of some group where [they] are not letting me in because of one friend?' I guess that was another moment, too, where I was just really mad." [Jamie Martinez, 31, No Affiliation, San Antonio]*

For Fernando Morales, discrimination came in the form of neglect and low expectations. As he described his choice to leave college to follow in his father's footsteps and become an electrician, he described a learning disorder that his teachers didn't notice or diagnose until he was in middle school:

"[My favorite subject], I have to say is math . . . I hate reading. I hate writing . . . I just was never good at it. I struggled with it growing up . . . I was dyslexic, they didn't find out until I was in seventh grade . . . One teacher sighed, and she said, 'I want to show you something. Come on . . . It's not like I can't do [read], but what [it] would take you to read a whole page would take me—what will take you ten minutes would take me like thirty, forty-five minutes . . . But not no more. I can do it now. I can read fluently now. Now that I've actually helped myself." [Fernando Morales, 28, No Affiliation, San Antonio]

These young Latinos, particularly from the South and West Sides of San Antonio, described educational experiences where if they succeeded, it was against the odds, and without the proper support and encouragement from their teachers. Meanwhile, as one woman in her thirties described it, the school environment was a place where racial prejudices and tensions spilled over from the local neighborhood, and young people had to guard against unsolicited conflict with other students.

"You Can't Speak Spanish Here"

Another distinct racialized pattern we identified in our conversations was related to Latinos' linguistic experiences. In San Antonio, a number of second-, third-, and fourth-generation Latinos talked about not speaking Spanish. While they could speak a few words, several of them said they had lost their ability to speak the language because their parents had not taught it to them in order to protect them from the painful discrimination they had suffered growing up as Spanish speakers. This discrimination occurred mostly at school. Consider what Monica Vega shared with us about how those experiences fostered a larger sense of powerlessness for her mother:

"I grew up with my aunt—that's who I call my mom—Dora. She always believed that we don't matter as a people, from her experiences, I guess. She had a son that was hit by a car, by a drunk driver, and justice really was never served to the gentleman that hit her son. I guess that's where some of that's rooted, where she feels like [the authorities] don't care about us. Secondly, growing up in school, being chastised for being Hispanic, Mexicana, speaking Spanish with her sisters in class, or to each other when they weren't speaking to anyone else . . . they were always getting after them. She felt like, well, since she was young, she was told not to have her voice, or to speak in her first language. I guess she never felt like she was ever her[self], maybe. That's how I think that they see it. She was never allowed to be who she was. It was never okay to be who she was, because she bleached her hair blonde when she was in high school and has been blonde ever since." [Monica Vega, 36, Democrat, San Antonio]

Monica also shared that at school, her mother and her mother's sisters had been assigned anglicized names by their teachers, to replace their Mexican names.

Melissa Vela-Williamson similarly described the deep racial and linguistic discrimination that led to language loss for her generation. Some San Antonians spoke about their loss of Spanish as if they had lost a form of social capital, and they believed this placed them at a disadvantage:

"I remember, growing up, it was a disadvantage to speak Spanish . . . You were less-than. You were stupid . . . There's a decade or two—at least [with] Gen X, Gen X lost the Spanish language in households that were here in the U.S. It's my theory . . . those who have grown up or were born in the fifties or sixties, if they were Spanish-dominant children, they were discriminated against . . . [they] were called dirty Mexicans, wetbacks . . . they were put in special ed classes. If they were in private schools, the nurses, the nuns would smack their hands with rulers. There was a lot of discrimination against Spanish-dominant kids." [Melissa Vela-Williamson, 39, Republican, San Antonio]

It is our belief that when people are systematically led to lose their own language, they may also lose some ability to understand complex representations of themselves, their relations, and their histories. Some of our interviewees, such as Mary Uribe, understood the connection between the schools they had attended, their curriculum, and the systematic erasure of their culture:

"Like I said, my grandma was really—she was segregated out. She was put on the back of the bus . . . she didn't want to teach my mom Spanish . . . When you're not felt welcome there, or even the literature that you're taught . . . first of all, you don't really learn about your history at all, or you don't see any representation at all, or if you do, they're all subservient roles . . . For example, I think the closest thing we can talk about is probably Native Americans. That's what they teach in high school that can relate to, like, Mexican-American history, right? Basically, you're kind of taught that they were like savages, and they didn't have any civilization until White people came and taught them everything. That's how we were taught in school—you know what I mean?" [Mary Uribe, 26, Independent, San Antonio]

Residential Segregation and Low Socioeconomic Mobility

It's been well-documented that despite its economic and population growth, San Antonio is one of the most segregated cities in the United States.[1] Indeed, the current ethnic and racial concentrations by sectors in the city still resemble the red-lining prevalent in the 1930s. Today, a look at the West, East, and South sides of San Antonio reveals the largest concentrations of Blacks and Latinos, and the lasting effects of years of economic stagnation, even though the

city has recently begun to implement an equity framework. People we spoke with talked about an enduring divide in the city, where certain sectors are known to receive more resources and offer better services to their constituents. To illustrate the contrast, this is how Robert Cuellar* described his experience living in the North Side of San Antonio, a more affluent part of the city:

"Well, I grew up on the North Side and at that time, a lot of the families, they were coming in and moving in. I moved into a house at Thousand Oaks . . . we were the very first people in the subdivision. A lot of the families that moved in around us were military, they'd been stationed all over . . . They were mainly White. I mainly grew up around White kids . . . I don't remember a whole lot of Black kids around in middle school or high school . . . The way that the city is built up, it feels like maybe economically, there's more libraries on the North Side, there's more fire stations." [Robert Cuellar, 45, Democrat, San Antonio]*

Our interviews with Latinos living in the more segregated sectors of San Antonio spoke to their deep affect for their neighborhoods, but also described a persistent struggle for economic survival with very few avenues for economic mobility. For Peter Anthony Guzman, the pride of living in the same neighborhood as his parents and his grandparents was also imbued with a sense of being stigmatized as poor and Mexican. He spoke emotionally about the difficulty of finding a job that would pay him a living wage:

"I couldn't find a good, reliable job that was convenient and something that worked around my schedule. That was a toll on me. I was only bringing home $300 every week. I pay about $700 a month [in rent]. I was having to do odd jobs. I was having to cut neighbors' grasses, go driving around, handing out my number, putting [it] on Facebook, offering services and all that. I was just trying to make a living, and it was very hard. It's still hard to this day. I'm still struggling, I can't say everything is peaches and creams." [Peter Anthony Guzman, 28, Democrat, San Antonio]

For Mary Uribe, being able to live with her father was her only lifeline:

"I live with my dad . . . he's not like a co-parent, but I feel if I didn't live there, then I probably wouldn't be able to do any of this, because I would just be working like three jobs—I mean, I still work a lot! But, like, I would just be working to pay the rent, not to go to school. Because right now, when I work, it's to save up for my school or for my son's education, things like that." [Mary Uribe, 26, Independent, San Antonio]

Some respondents experienced economic precarity as a running challenge that affected the entire family. Guillermo Orsini shared with us:

"We do not have that much money to work with. My parents are divorced, but my father, of course, contributes with his income. Unfortunately, he's been technically unemployed for some time now, after being laid off from his job in February of 2017. He's been trying to look for work and he's found work here and there, but he has not found work that is more than, I'd say, six months. It's very hard to come by work that is within his related field as he's getting older." [Guillermo Orsini, 20, Democrat, San Antonio]

Entrenched Disempowerment

Many of the people we interviewed in San Antonio were second-, third-, fourth-, and even fifth-generation Americans. Recent data shows that voter turnout among naturalized Latino citizens has actually been higher than among U.S.-born Latino citizens.[2] We believe that in San Antonio, the longstanding experiences of racism, economic oppression, and residential segregation for generations of Latinos has led to a generalized sense of entrenched disempowerment that has spilled over into other

areas of their life, including political engagement and voting participation.

Some of the stories that point to entrenched disempowerment are stories of people who describe not being able to trust themselves to know what is best for them. This also includes stories of people unable to imagine themselves as agents of change.

As an example, consider this explanation from Peter Anthony Guzman about why he doesn't vote:

"I know the precincts, where to go, and I pass it up all the time . . . I see the 'Vote Here' sign . . . and I've been tempted several times. I've gone to the parking lot and sat in the parking lot, [I'll] sit there and be like, 'No, I'm not going to do it.' And I'll take off . . . I felt that my vote doesn't matter, doesn't count. That's what stopped me." [Peter Anthony Guzman, 28, Democrat, San Antonio]

Another nonvoter in San Antonio, Jamie Martinez, explained why she sits out elections, saying she doesn't believe that her vote makes a difference: *"This is going to sound really bad, but no, I don't think so . . . I feel that when you don't have money and when you don't have power, you don't really make those kinds of decisions. It's really hard to probably explain the way I want it to come out . . . If I felt that my vote actually mattered and made a difference, then definitely, yes, that would be my responsibility to go out there and vote. But I don't have that feeling towards voting. At this time in my life . . . I feel that if I did see some really big changes being made, then I would say, 'Yes, this is our responsibility. This is how we're going to change the world that we're living in and make a difference.' At this point, no. I haven't felt badly [for not voting]." [Jamie Martinez, 31, No Affiliation, San Antonio]*

CASE STUDY #2: THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

INSIGHT:

Longstanding local political cultures and corrupt or closed practices in the Rio Grande Valley have discouraged Latinos' widespread participation and faith in the political system.

Extensive, Historical Corruption

In 2014, the FBI launched the Rio Grande Valley Public Corruption Task Force to investigate misconduct by politicians in the region. But as they came to find, the problems of corruption—the abuse of government authority, or the use of public office for private gain—were widespread and entrenched. What the FBI task force found in the Valley ranged "from drug smuggling, vote stealing, courthouse bribery, under-the-table payoffs and health care fraud."[3] They found that corruption was rampant at every level of public life: among school boards, city and county governments, and judicial, executive, and legislative bodies.

To Latinos in the Valley, this FBI task force did not tell them anything they did not already know.

In fact, from talking to Latinos in the region, we believe that a majority of residents have had some personal experience with corruption, whether they interact with elected officials or government representatives. Our interviewees expressed that corruption has always been an issue in the Valley, and that the problem is worse there than in other regions.

Daniel Lopez described the enduring nature of corruption and how Valley residents have become so accustomed to it, that they turn the other way:

"The people who are greedy—we're talking specifically about politicians and how it is here in the Valley—[when] they get caught, and then all of a sudden [residents are] surprised, and some are like, 'Well, we knew, but nobody says anything.' It's hush-hush . . . it's always been like that." [Daniel Lopez, 51, Independent, Rio Grande Valley]

Emilia Alvarez, a teacher, described how the corruption even seeps into school districts, which led her to speculate that it was likely more serious at other levels of government:

"I'm not too aware of everything that goes on and I think probably it's because I don't know the people in power . . . I know that when I was working for Donna ISD . . . I know that politics is always corrupt because it's always who you know. They were doing the buying and the selling of votes, but this was just at the school board level. I can only imagine what was happening at the other levels." [Emilia Alvarez Gamboa, 35, Independent, Rio Grande Valley]

Closed Networks Make It Hard to Compete

One of the most salient features of local politics that has developed in the Rio Grande Valley is the close-knit system of reciprocity among people who hold political office, commonly known as compadrazgo, or the compadre system. When Latinos talked about this system, they colloquially described it as "you scratch my back, I scratch yours," to depict the exchange of favors for political influence. Long-term connections and personal and social relationships that are cultivated over a period of time form the basis of this way of doing politics. As Luis E. Buenrostro described it:

"Down here, it's not what you know, but who you know. That's very prevalent down here. It's always going to be, 'You scratch my back, and I scratch your back.' It's unfortunate. [Luis E. Buenrostro, 61, Independent, Rio Grande Valley]

Another voter described how this culture manifests itself in even smaller ways. Instead of trying to sway voters through robust discussions of issues in town hall meetings or through grassroots campaigning, Manuel Charles described how political candidates use music and food:

"[Candidates will] do barbecues, they'll give out food and bring music and good musicians, and they'll roll you in." [Manuel Charles, 41, Independent, Rio Grande Valley]

The reliance on longstanding political and social relationships and exchanges of favors also means that the same people tend to receive the most campaign contributions, making it difficult for new candidates to break into the system and compete financially. Eduardo Martinez recalled one such race:

"You have to have so much money if you want to run for something. Even just a local example would be—what's his name? I can't remember, but there was a really big election that was happening here in the Valley in 2014, where there was this guy [running], it was somewhere in the Mission, La Joya area . . . even though [his] platform was more progressive and everything, he just never even stood a chance. It was just, like, the different gap in money." [Eduardo Martinez, 33, Democrat, Rio Grande Valley]

Candidates Don't Run on the Issues

More than any of the other regions where we conducted interviews, residents of the Rio Grande Valley could not articulate the difference between the two major political parties. In part, that's because one party has always been in control, preventing serious debates and competition between party platforms. But over and over, our interviewees in the Valley also told us that candidates did not run on issues, and, particularly in Brownsville, they compared local races to high school elections, with people running based only on name and popularity. As a result, some Valley residents have developed a cynical view of why people run for office. As Juan Flores shared:

"[Candidates] don't really stand and speak of what they're going to do. They just stand out there and say, 'Vote for me' . . . They don't really say, 'I want to do this, to fix this.' They just go, 'Hey, vote for me, I want to be in office.' Most of them see it as a cushy job where they can get money, in my eyes." [Juan C. Flores, 27, No Affiliation, Rio Grande Valley]

Others, such as Manuel Charles, were frustrated because they said it is difficult to hold elected leaders accountable and demand concrete results:

"They always talk about their districts. They always talk about, 'We're going to bring more jobs.' What have you done? Show me in black-and-white. Bring me numbers. Help for school districts, something, help for the elderly. There's a couple of elderly homes here. What are you doing here? Maybe you can enact a proposal for state health care and something to help them . . . Law enforcement, let's make our streets safer." [Manuel Charles, 41, Independent, Rio Grande Valley]

Extreme Poverty Makes Politics Secondary

According to U.S. Census data, Texas is home to some of the poorest counties in the country.[4] What is more, five of the poorest counties in Texas are all located in the Rio Grande Valley.[5] In addition to the rampant and historical corruption permeating every level of government, Latinos in the Rio Grande Valley face staggering economic inequality, where some are fabulously wealthy, while most struggle to get by or live in poverty.

This study suggests that the decision to participate in the political system, particularly for those who have weak ties to voting communities, cannot be divorced from the material conditions in which people live. In the face of what they perceive to be widespread corruption and control of power by a few, for many struggling Latinos in the Rio Grande Valley, participating in a system that seems indifferent to their needs does not have priority. Juan Flores reflected on the never-ending crush of poverty:

"Being poor really doesn't lend itself to fix[ing] major problems. There's a lot of families that have 20-year-old cars that would rather pay $1,000 to make it run, than $400 a month for a newer vehicle, because they just can't afford it. The father works all day, every day, to pay the bills, which doesn't leave him much . . . most people that are living day-to-day are worried about what they're going to eat that day, and what they're going to bring home. If the car needs to be fixed, if there is a roof and a leak that they have to fix . . . older vehicles roll over, they don't have the right tires. Tires are expensive . . . They can't pay $400 for a new set, so they buy $30 ones . . . they have like a millimeter of good rubber. Which they have to do every month, and rotate every tire, because it's the more inexpensive fix then, because that's all they can afford." [Juan C. Flores, 27, No Affiliation, Rio Grande Valley]

In the end, being poor in the Rio Grande Valley feels tantamount to being ignored by the people in power, which perpetuates the yawning gap between those who run government and those who feel deeply alienated by it. As Eduardo Martinez shared:

"I feel maybe myself, but also maybe my friends . . . maybe sometimes we're forgotten locally, I think . . . because I feel like there's a hierarchy, if that makes sense. I feel like I'm forgotten . . . I feel like people, sometimes in colonias, single moms and undocumented immigrants—a lot more people are more forgotten than me, are ignored." [Eduardo Martinez, 33, Democrat, Rio Grande Valley]

Endnotes

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3 John Burnett and Marisa Peñaloza, "Corruption On The Border: Dismantling Misconduct In The Rio Grande Valley," NPR Morning Edition, July 6, 2015, https://www.npr.org/2015/07/06/413463836/corruption-on-the-border-dismantling-misconduct-in-the-rio-grande-valley

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Chapter 3: Amid the Pandemic

COVID-19, GOVERNMENT RESPONSE, AND THE 2020 ELECTION

In May 2020, we conducted follow-up interviews with twenty participants who were either nonvoters or occasional voters, in each of the five regions we targeted in this study. The purpose of these interviews was to understand our interviewees' experiences of and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and to gauge how these events might impact their views and voting behavior, particularly around the 2020 election. We focused on nonvoters and occasional voters specifically to understand whether the pandemic has the potential to increase voter turnout and civic engagement—we presume that most regular voters will turn out for the election, as they would have before.

Our findings were mixed. Latinos who are not politically active or who are low propensity voters are learning about different levels of government responses to the pandemic, offering a de facto civics lesson that has allowed them to better connect government action and policy to their lives. But while many Latinos have become more politically aware and are changing the way they see politics and government, some are not changing, or are becoming more entrenched in their mistrust or cynicism of the political process.

Below, we outline how the Latinos we spoke with felt about the health care and financial crises brought on by COVID-19, which were closely intertwined for the people we interviewed. Everyone we spoke with had been impacted, and most of them expressed feeling a combination of confusion, doubt, anxiety, deep frustration, and fear. We then explain how Latinos feel about the government's responses to these crises. These opinions were varied and complex, as participants began to recognize that different levels of government are guided by differing interests. But nearly everyone we spoke with was deeply dissatisfied with the government response as a whole, though certain elected officials and institutions at the local level received some praise. We also address how Latinos are approaching the 2020 election as a result of the pandemic. Many, but not all nonvoters or sporadic voters said they were now more inclined to vote than in the past. Finally, in a brief conclusion, we explore how Latinos broadly support the option of voting by mail in 2020, even if many don't fully trust the U.S. Post Office's ability to deliver, and would not vote by mail themselves.

INSIGHT:

Latinos have been extraordinarily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and have deep concerns for their livelihoods. They are deeply frustrated with official responses to the pandemic, and do not feel confident in government. Many, but not all nonvoters and occasional voters say they now plan to vote in the 2020 election, as the pandemic has allowed them to better understand how government policy impacts their life.

1. Latinos have been deeply impacted by the pandemic, and have strong feelings and emotions about it.

We heard three interrelated emotional experiences in response to the public health crisis caused by COVID-19 and the sudden economic decline: 1.) We heard a lot of confusion and uncertainty about nearly everything. What's true? Who can I trust? What's the risk? How do I mitigate the risk? Who's doing what, and when? People were questioning most of their institutions, including government, business, and the news media. 2.) Levels of anxiety were very high, as Latinos recognized just how exposed they had become in this new political and economic context. People are worried for the safety of themselves and their family. They feel exceedingly vulnerable in terms of their health and their economic well-being. Will I get sick? Will I have a job? How am I going to pay for my health care, my car, my rent, my groceries? Will this get worse? How bad could things get? 3.) As a natural emotional progression of confusion and anxiety, we heard deep frustration, which is the root of anger. Often without saying so explicitly, people were aggravated. For instance, one man we interviewed wondered about the purpose of the $1,200 federal stimulus check, telling us: "Hey, that could pay for the down payment on your coffin . . . because I've never seen or heard of us getting a stimulus package before, and maybe because I was just out of the loop with things, but it's nerve-racking." [Joshua Casso, 35, Republican, San Antonio]

People were not separating their thoughts and feelings between the public health crisis and the economic crisis, as the two concerns were ultimately inseparable. Here we try to separate those concerns for analytic purposes.

By and large, few people we talked to had had direct experience of the viral illness in May 2020, when we spoke to them on the phone. But we heard deep concerns and fears of who might get sick, including many interviewees who worried about themselves or family members with underlying medical conditions. A couple of interviewees came down with flu-like symptoms that they believed could have been the virus, but none of them had received a positive test result or required medical intervention. Instead, what was top-of-mind were the disruptions to daily life

caused by COVID-19, as people figured out new ways of living, staying at home, wearing masks, and taking many other precautions. But most people were coping with the health news and accepting what was happening and what they were learning.

Much more of the conversation was led by economic concerns. Even when people talked about health issues, they always circled back to their personal financial fate. The economic impact was uneven, and some were being impacted much more than others. But even among those who were doing okay—whether they were still employed, staying afloat with unemployment benefits, or being supported by family members—there seemed to be an impending or looming anxiety that everything could fall apart, and could do so very quickly. Economically, Latinos were feeling severely vulnerable.

In empathizing with the financial challenges of other people they knew, many Latinos recognized that this could, and likely would become their economic fate as well—perhaps sooner than later. Consider these commentaries by interviewees regarding the federal government's $1,200 federal stimulus check, and their challenges paying their rent. Latinos don't see this money as a "stimulus"—that is, as money to spur or energize the economy—they saw it as essential funds, yet clearly insufficient.

"That's a good thing, but really, they give $1,200 in a month. My rent is $1,200 bucks. That doesn't include my costs of food and all that stuff . . . I'm still working, but imagine the people that are living paycheck to paycheck. Is it really helping [them]?" [Ricardo A. Razo, 27, Libertarian, El Paso]

"Twelve hundred dollars goes by super quick. After paying my rent and my bills, I didn't really have that much left to play with. Luckily, I'm already getting my unemployment [benefits], but I know a lot of other people have had issues . . . A couple of people have even moved out [of their homes] because they just didn't want to deal with the landlords demanding rent and stuff like that." [Victoria Garza, 30, No Affiliation, Rio Grande Valley]

"One of the things that concerns me is that if families don't have to pay their rent or mortgage for two months, because they can't be evicted, and let's say for those two months, they don't pay their rent, what happens on that? That first day of July when they do have to pay their rent, how are they going to be protected from that when they owe this large lump sum?" [Jamie Martinez, 31, No Affiliation, San Antonio]*

"Luckily, I'm blessed to have a job and still [be] working, so I thank God for that. Well, the other people don't have the opportunity, so even when they start working again, they're going to be behind a whole bunch, they're going to be behind two payments, three payments. So the people got car payments to pay, and stuff like that. So I feel like the government should have helped out more financially. Or at least made a rule where you don't have to pay rent until this thing is over, so they won't be in debt when it's over." [Jon Leal, 33, No Affiliation, Dallas]

"I mean, mortgage and rent and stuff—$1,200 is just enough for one month. Since this is going on, what are they planning on doing the next few months now? Because it's getting worse by the day. Twelve hundred dollars is really not anything right now, basically." [Daniel Gonzalez, 24, Independent, Dallas]

In short, the full economic repercussions of the pandemic—and therefore the fuller political repercussions—had not yet been fully felt or had not sunk in. Latinos were worried as much about their health as about their financial situations, and especially the looming threat of sliding (deeper) into poverty. As people more fully recognized just how vulnerable they were, they questioned how stimulus packages and unemployment benefits

would be sustained. In the words of one El Paso voter, “something doesn’t make sense.” This uncertainty was fueling deep anxiety, fear, and anger.

2. People have become more aware of different levels of government response, and are frustrated with those responses not aligning.

Nearly all participants discussed how different levels of government—federal, state, county, and municipal—are at work during the pandemic, which reflected an awareness of government action that we did not hear in our initial interviews. Unfortunately, that awareness was driven by discussions and frequent frustration over how the different levels of government were in conflict or were contradicting each other.

Even among Latinos who were satisfied by one or more levels of government response, they felt conflicted, concerned, and anxious about the decisions and actions of public officials. To them, clearly the government was not in alignment. Everyone agreed that there did not seem to be a plan, or at least a common, shared plan. They felt the governor was communicating poorly and not offering clear direction.

As one person explained, just reading the news had become a source of anxiety for her, which added to the challenge of understanding what, if anything, the government planned to do: “It's too stressful, even just on Facebook, trying to go through the newsfeed. There’s just so much, and on both sides, so much criticism. That, to me, is stressful . . . I do think they’ve done some things right, I don’t agree with other things. But I don’t want to dwell on it because that would cause me stress.” [Cristina Roberts*, 44, No Affiliation, Rio Grande Valley] Another interviewee told us,

“Here in El Paso, we had different orders. I was trying to keep up to date to be able—What can I do? What am I not supposed to be doing? First, it was suggested to wear a mask. And then a few days later, we were required to wear a mask. Then a few days later, you don’t have to wear the mask in public spaces anymore. They’re closing the parks and then they’re opening the trails. And then they’re opening the store. It’s difficult to know what’s really safe, what should you do, what should you avoid?” [Celia Aguilar, 33, No Affiliation, El Paso]

The pandemic had become a de facto lesson in civics for Latinos and all Americans. Many interviewees were effectively telling us that they understood how government works in a way they hadn’t previously. They could literally see what was happening and how it affected them. For example, that same woman who pointed out the government’s contradictions, and who had not voted before, now had a detailed opinion of how the different levels should coordinate: "I would like the local government to provide more information, and the federal government to provide funding and resources for the different states.” [Celia Aguilar, 33, No Affiliation, El Paso] The pandemic had exposed some truths about how government operates at different levels and in hypothetical coordination that were previously either hidden from view for people or easily taken for granted.

Many Latinos talked about how the federal government had been too slow to respond to the public health crisis. They felt elected officials had not taken the threat seriously enough or soon enough, or taken necessary steps to stop or slow the pandemic before it grew out of hand.

At the same time, we mostly heard high support for the federal stimulus checks, and a degree of

appreciation for this monetary help. However, as noted before, many interviewees felt that one check of $1,200 was not nearly enough. Further, a number of them were unclear about whether they would have to pay it back. And several talked about how the government could be doing even more, such as sending monthly checks, as they heard governments were doing so in other countries.

At the municipal level, for the most part, Latinos had positive feelings about their governments' handling of the crisis. To them, those public officials who were closest to the public health challenge on the ground seemed to have a better grasp on how to deal with it. Most participants supported the stay-at-home orders delivered by county judges or mayors, and felt that the governor's order to reopen the economy in early May had been premature.

We also paid attention to what Latinos were not discussing at that moment—such as larger-scale or global economic problems and initiatives. For instance, when discussing the federal response, people rarely spoke about the broader impact of the stimulus package, including the issues of business bailouts or how much money was being provided for the largest corporations. A few talked about the plight of small businesses, an issue that hit closer to home. But structural economic issues around debt or renters' rights were still too ambiguous to address in concrete terms. Instead, Latinos focused on the more pressing issues that were impacting them directly, such as the stimulus checks.

3. Latinos do not feel confident in government right now.

While some Latinos felt confidence in some levels of their government, we did not talk to anyone who felt confident in government as a whole. They did not see a coordinated response, nor did they seem to trust that one was coming. Instead, the pandemic had exposed Latinos to a degree of government infighting and conflict that, while not necessarily surprising, was certainly alarming to them. One person who already held negative views of government told us how difficult it was to believe anyone anymore: "I think the government sucks at everything. That's my thing. I say, whether you're Republican, Democrat, left, right, conservative, whatever, I think that the government should probably not intervene in a lot of this stuff . . . It's just hard. It goes back to the information. I don't know what to believe or not, and I try to keep myself informed." [Ricardo A. Razo, 27, Libertarian, El Paso]

In the context of the pandemic, most participants saw government as having a responsibility to meet their needs—for safety, economic security, and health—more than needing to protect their individual rights. One interviewee said, "Who I feel confident about is more of the people whose sole purpose right now is to research the virus and to try to find a cure or a vaccine for it. That's my trust right there. That's who I think the government . . . should be backing up this moment. The frontliners." [Matthew Ramirez*, 23, No Affiliation, El Paso]

4. Many, but not all, Latino nonvoters and sporadic voters now plan to vote in 2020. The pandemic and other factors have fueled that decision.

Many Latinos who did not vote or who voted sporadically in the past now told us that they were certain they wanted to vote. They seemed to have an improved understanding of how government works and of how and why their vote could make a difference. This clearly demonstrated to us that their political views and

voting behaviors are not static. Politicization is a fluid process—a process that may be shaped over time and through a number of pathways, including the experience of a social, health, or economic crisis.

A number of our interviewees told us that they were discussing politics and government with others much more since having conducted their first interview with us in 2019, and since the onset of the pandemic. Many now talked about their vote as a way to reclaim their voice, express their opinion, or have a say in what they consider a high-stakes election. Whether these people will actually turn out on election day remains to be seen; as we explore in other parts of this report, a number of factors coalesce to determine if a person has not just the conviction to vote, but the impulse and confidence to actually go to the polls. But there was a marked change in how many Latinos who previously had been disengaged from politics were now talking about government and their own need to participate electorally.

5. Some nonvoters and sporadic voters now want to vote because of their involvement in this research study.

Among nonvoters who said they were now planning to vote, some of them talked about how they were engaging in conversations about politics with family members or friends, doing research on the candidates, and/or receiving encouragement from others to vote. This suggests that nonvoters can indeed develop habits that support voting, which can then influence them to show up at the polls.

During this new round of interviews, we discovered that the initial interviews we conducted in the fall of 2019 had had an indirect or direct effect in getting some participants to more seriously consider voting in 2020. This is despite the fact that the purpose of our interviews had not been to encourage them to vote—we only engaged people around why they vote or don't vote, and how they view government. To us, this suggests that it's not direct persuasion, but rather substantive engagement around the subject of voting and politics, that can be a catalyst for change. Several participants we returned to this May said they had voted in the 2020 primary election, despite not doing so in the past. One person explicitly described the role our interview had played:

"Maybe it has a lot to do with the conversation and the interview that I had [with you], to just bring awareness [that] our vote does matter. Somebody does listen, and you have this back-burner thought that, oh, we still follow this 200-year-old voting system that's out of date and should probably be updated . . . It just brought more awareness in my eyes. [Joshua Casso, 35, Republican, San Antonio]

Several nonvoters shared similar sentiments about their emerging awareness. A common theme with them was the impact of engaging in conversation with others about politics:

"Yes. I voted in the primaries. I think our last interview motivated me to be more active in that. I did my research and I was very proud of myself . . . I think it was thinking about the types of candidates that I want to see in office, and if I don't actively participate in trying to put—even if it's not the ideal person, or somebody who is completely aligned with what I want to see or what I believe—being able to choose somebody, even if they don't get elected. Like, 'Okay, well, I made an effort. I didn't just allow somebody else to make a choice for me or completely disregard this opportunity that I have.' Especially thinking locally, I want to be able to have a say into who I want to be representing us or who I want to see in office." [Celia Aguilar, 33, No Affiliation, El Paso]

"I have, actually, sat down with my sister, and we've been talking about [the election], we've been reading about it . . . It's eye-opening for us." [Celeste M. Garcia, 21, Independent, Houston]

"Yes, I will vote [in the 2020 election], and my wife's going to vote too, as well. I feel like we should get our opinions heard . . . Like I told you before, when we did the interview, I believed our vote didn't count, and stuff like that. But I think it will . . . Even if I believe it will count or not, I still need to at least make my presence heard by voting." [Jon Leal, 33, No Affiliation, Dallas]

"Yes, I actually ended up voting for the first time . . . I feel like it's because I've always said I'm [going to] vote and then I never have, so I was, like, I better do it this time [laughs]. I finally did it." [Karen Gurrola-Garcia, 30, Democrat, El Paso]

6. The most entrenched nonvoters have not changed their minds as a result of recent events.

Still, many of the entrenched nonvoters we interviewed had not changed their views of government or of the potential impact of their vote. They continued to express to us that their vote does not and could not make a difference. Some of them referenced a bigger level of injustice they felt they couldn't influence, with one of them explicitly citing the Electoral College as the cause of his cynicism. Others underscored that they were not well-informed enough to make a decision, and therefore were not comfortable casting a vote. And still others seemed to be reflecting back a running theme from our previous interviews, reflecting a serious disconnect between politicians and Latino representation. In short, they felt that none of the candidates are trying to seriously engage with them, and the lack of interest runs both ways. One person dourly concluded: "I'm not going to go vote for anyone. Nobody has appealed to my interest . . . I think it honestly has just come to, you get to pick your poison . . . who's the best poison [for] the nation? Who's next?" [Matthew Ramirez*, 23, No Affiliation, El Paso]

The reasons this subset of nonvoters provided for not voting were similar before and after the pandemic began. It is immediately unclear what, if anything, might soften or change their perspective on voting, though other parts of this report explore the various pathways that have turned nonvoters into voters. (See Chapter 2, Section 1, Voting as Empowerment and Belonging; and Chapter 2, Section 3, Voting as a Social Habit.)

We also recognized an important trend between levels of entrenched nonvoting in the border regions of Texas (El Paso and the Rio Grande Valley) in comparison with the non-border metro areas (San Antonio, Dallas, and Houston). We perceive that this relates to at least three broader social, political, and economic factors. 1.) It seems that residents of the border region have more frequently encountered negative interactions with government institutions over the course of their lives. They tend to trust the government less than people in urban areas. 2.) Border residents in many cases appear to be hyper-marginalized, and generally feel an extremely low degree of belonging in terms of American citizenship, society, and the economy. For example, they are often and seemingly easily neglected or forgotten in national media discourses, except for when news stories focus on border crossings and/or immigration enforcement—with these cultural narratives serving to only heighten their marginalization. 3.) Local governments along the Texas-Mexico border have been the subject of countless allegations of corruption over

decades, to a degree not encountered in non-border regions (See Chapter 2, Section 10, Two Case Studies; the case study of the Rio Grande Valley specifically addresses this problem). As a result of these factors, combined with high and rising poverty levels, we believe many Latinos in these border regions have become habitual nonvoters whose mindset is tougher to sway. As one highly educated nonvoter in the Rio Grande Valley told us: "I stay away from politics and if anything, [the pandemic] has solidified that—it seems like a such a can of worms to me, that I don't want to get involved." [Cristina Roberts*, 44, No Affiliation, Rio Grande Valley]

7. Latinos want more and clearer information, in order to better understand their vulnerability and what to do about it.

In general, Latinos want more information about political candidates and policy proposals at all levels of government. They want to know more, and they want information that is presented more clearly, in order to truly understand their choices. This was especially the case among nonvoters, many of whom have not voted because they are concerned that they might make the wrong choice or vote against their own interests. Many have found information about candidates to be contradictory or confusing, and they feel vulnerable in their decision-making processes around voting.

8. Those who plan to vote in 2020 are registered to vote. Most agreed that voting by mail should be possible, although many of them distrusted the process.

Those participants we spoke with who were planning to vote said they were already registered or believed that they were registered. They also said they understood the registration process. However, no one we spoke with knew the deadline for registering—or even that there is a deadline.

Most of our interviewees said they would support the option of voting by mail this year, due to the threat of COVID-19. They felt that people should have other avenues for voting if they feel vulnerable going to the polls. However, no one expressed a particularly strong view that voting by mail should happen or should be a right for everyone, even during the pandemic. Some of them said that voting by mail would likely result in a higher turnout, and most agreed that voting by mail would be safer for public health, in order to prevent the spread of the virus. But several Latinos also expressed concerns about the reliability of the U.S. Postal Service, and the opportunities this might raise for voter fraud. In short, most of them supported voting by mail, but said they would not do so themselves.

Chapter 4: Other Things We Heard

After many interviews and speaking with people about a wide range of topics, our Key Findings represent the most important insights of this research. However, during the course of our conversations, interviewees touched on a number of other repeating themes, many of which are important topics of national discussion and debate. In this chapter, we briefly review these salient topics, as they relate to how Texas Latinos are thinking about some of the more consequential political issues the country faces today.

1. Media and Social Media

Most people we interviewed were well-informed and in touch with current political discussions, even if they didn't necessarily know all the details of specific debates. Even nonvoters regularly consume political news through media and social media. In other words, Texas Latinos are not living in a political vacuum—they are not stereotypical "low information" voters.

Television seems to be the most common source of news, followed by news articles circulating on social media, especially on Facebook and Twitter. Social media seems to provide a way for people to broaden and diversify their media consumption, rather than always relying on the same news sources. At the same time, many people expressed a sense of exhaustion and frustration with social media, including recurring complaints over high levels of partisanship, bullying, and trolling.

While we generally heard various levels of distrust of the news media, Latinos nonetheless rely very heavily on media for information. Across the political spectrum, we heard skepticism over specific news sources and accusations of political bias, as well as well as some people deriding "fake news." Yet few people reflected on how their own political outlook is mediated or shaped by other forces beyond the media.

Many Latinos have adopted a style of media consumption we might refer to as "grazing" for political information. Very few, if any, Latinos are exclusively accepting any single source of political information as objective and authoritative, even beyond the media—this would include information from political campaigns and advocacy groups. One voter described his grazing style of media consumption as a necessary tactic for navigating today's complex environment of biased media: "I'll try and read from at least three different sources online to gauge where everything actually is [true] . . . I occasionally read a little bit of the articles on Fox to see what kind of a spin they're putting on stuff." This person also benefited from his age and high level of education in putting news into context, complaining that, "Now a lot of things seem more like opinion pieces than straightforward facts . . . Now we've got Russian troll farms and all of this disinformation." [Robert Cuellar, 45, Democrat, San Antonio]

2. Top-Of-Mind Issues

Because our research methodology included many open-ended questions, interviewees spoke openly, exploring issues that were important to them beyond what we asked them to address. Some of the most salient policy issues that Texas Latinos spoke about included:

- **Health Care:** Latinos are most concerned about the affordability of health care. They are open to different policy proposals or ways of structuring health care offerings. Very few people had a strong opinion about or mastery of the finer points of debate around universal health care. The vast majority do believe that everyone needs health care in the country.

- **Jobs and Cost of Living:** Most Latinos want to ensure they have a good job, and would like to find better-paying jobs. Better-paying jobs, they recognized, are tied to education and training. Among working-class Latinos, we heard some of the same issues and concerns as with non-Latinos, especially around perceived competition for jobs and good pay.

- **Immigration Enforcement:** Most people we interviewed had friends and/or family members who have been impacted by immigration rules and enforcement. They are concerned about the lack of transparency and unpredictability around immigration policy, and especially, around the enforcement of those policies. This includes issues of enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as the persistent threat of immigration raids and arrests elsewhere, such as at job sites or on the street.

- **Gun Control:** Not many people went out of their way to critique the widespread ownership or use of guns in Texas. Instead, we often heard enthusiasm for guns, especially among men, but also some women. We interviewed a number of Latinos who own semiautomatic weapons. At the same time, participants expressed concerns over gun safety, and across the political spectrum, they supported more regulation such as background checks and red flag laws.

- **Policing and Safety:** A number of Latino males described troubling experiences of racial profiling with local and federal law enforcement, and expressed that they did not feel protected by police. Most of these were younger males, but older men also shared concerning stories from their past.

- **College:** When it comes to college, most Latinos recognize the value of furthering their education to improve their future job prospects. But they are deeply concerned about college affordability and especially rising tuition debt. Nowhere is the issue more salient than among recent college graduates.

At the same time that we listened to these top-of-mind issues, we also took note of those topics that were not being discussed as much as we expected:

- **Climate Change:** Some participants raised the issue in general terms, but very few of our interviewees spoke passionately about climate change.

- **Criminal Justice Reform:** We suspect that, if prompted, more people would speak about the criminal justice system and the issue of reform. But in our interviews, without specific questions to prompt it, very few individuals brought up the issue unless they had a troubling personal experience.

- **Abortion:** We discuss this point further below. In short, however, the majority of participants said they were personally against abortion, but in regards to policy, they expressed much more flexibility than we expected.
- **K-12 Education:** Latinos are deeply concerned about their children's futures, including how education can position them for better career paths. Many expressed wanting their children to have better educational levels and outcomes than their own. But without specific prompting, we did not hear strong opinions about education policy debates.

3. Gun Control

Not many participants went out of their way to critique widespread gun ownership or use in Texas. Instead, we often heard enthusiasm for guns, especially among men, but also some women. We spoke with a number of people who own semiautomatic weapons.

We heard a range of positions on guns from across the political spectrum, many of which did not fit neatly into ideological debates. For example, some on the right supported gun controls, including national background checks or red flag laws. And some on the left vocally supported the right to own guns. Several people cited their Second Amendment right to bear arms.

Latino gun owners gave two major reasons for owning guns. First, to protect themselves and their family. Some talked about their fears of safety and the very real dangers faced by Latinos in their neighborhoods. Second, for recreation, which mainly included target shooting rather than the more expensive sport of hunting.
We spoke with multiple men who owned assault rifles, including one who bought a rifle after the August 2019 El Paso Walmart shooting because he was concerned there would be an assault weapon ban.

Overall, it was unclear from this qualitative study whether Latinos are more or less inclined to own guns or support gun rights, in comparison with Texans and Americans generally.

We did, however, hear significant concerns from interviewees about the high number of mass shootings, and their inability to protect themselves and their children from them. Some of them spoke about this emotionally. However, these conversations were not linked with strong assertions that what is needed is much tighter restriction of gun ownership.

4. Abortion

Most Latinos are against abortion generally, on a personal level. However, contrary to prevailing narratives, we noticed a significant degree of flexibility around this issue, especially in regards to abortion policy.

Many Latinos who were personally opposed to abortion nonetheless felt that the issue was not a high enough priority to change the way they vote. Women were especially more likely to explain their decision-making in this way, and many of them offered nuanced or expansive descriptions of their perspective on protecting and preserving life, more generally. For example, one woman in Dallas who is ideologically liberal said that for her, a "pro-life" position also means having a "consistent life ethic," which she described as a set of principles that extend beyond conception and birth to encompass the protection of human life at all stages.

We heard similar sentiments from other participants who struggled personally with the issue of abortion, but found it acceptable, for example, to support pro-choice candidates. One of them explained that she believes God cares deeply for the most marginalized of humans, and therefore she is able to vote for candidates who care about the poor, even if they are pro-choice. Another woman explained that she prioritizes how elected officials treat immigrant children and their families, over the question of abortion.

When it comes to policy, some Latinos are clearly pro-choice, supporting a woman's right to make the ultimate decision. But others arrived at this ideological position in different ways. Some felt that neither they nor the government should make any health care decision for any other person. Others expressed flexibility around when abortion should be permissible and legal, such as in the case of health issues relating to the mother or the unborn child.

Generally, participants' pro-life versus pro-choice views grew more complex once they were engaged in deeper conversation. But amid their general flexibility and open-mindedness, there was also, for some of them, pervasive misconceptions about the "other side's" views—for instance, suggesting that people who are pro-choice are also pro-abortion.

For many Latinos we spoke with, their views on abortion are closely tied to their religious faith. And some talked about how abortion plays a deciding role in how they vote. But for the vast majority, abortion was one of multiple issues they care about, many of which took precedence for them in their political choices. A few Latinos did make decisions solely based on abortion policy, but this was not very common.

We found that religious faith seems to align with some, but not all Latino voters being more socially conservative. Yet, this is not indicative of "Latino culture" as a whole. Instead, we discovered a great degree of diversity in terms of people's social values, while also discovering that Latinos today seem to be less and less religiously active. There is a somewhat outdated discourse suggesting that Latinos are socially conservative because of their strong religious affiliations, but we did not find that to be the case in our interviews.

5. LGBTQ Issues

As a whole, most participants did not express strong opinions about LGBTQ issues. Those who did share the strongest opinions were either guided by strongly conservative religious beliefs, or, alternatively, were individuals who identified as LGBTQ themselves or considered themselves allies of the community.

We heard a range of perspectives against LGBTQ issues and causes, including some participants who had conflicted viewpoints. We did not hear outright slander or blatant vilification of the LGBTQ community. On the contrary, most of those interviewees who don't actively support LGBTQ rights or the broader LGBTQ social movement agenda nonetheless believe that LGBTQ people should have rights and shouldn't be discriminated against. Some Latinos based their perspective on their religious faith, saying essentially that this "lifestyle" is "a sin." This was not a widely-held opinion; however, it represented a sizable group among more evangelical Christians. Other participants told us that it's not the government's role to support, advocate, or get involved with LGBTQ issues. For example, one man complained about one presidential candidate's platform that sought

to make churches recognize LGBTQ rights or risk losing non-profit status. Still others said that they would not discriminate against LGBTQ individuals, but that they personally or for religious reasons don't agree with or accept the LGBTQ "lifestyle." Some Latinos essentially said that they don't care either way, because it's not a relevant issue for them.

On the other hand, we also heard a range of perspectives in support of LGBTQ individuals, issues, and causes, and these were not limited to people who identified as LGBTQ. Among Latinos who identify as LGBTQ, we heard deeply moving stories about families who struggled to accept their children or about growing up in socially conservative communities. One gay man described what it was like for him in a northern suburb of San Antonio: "After a while, you get kind of claustrophobic there. Being gay, you had to hold your head up high, because not only do people stare, but they will definitely make you feel unwelcome." [Robert Cuellar*, 45, Democrat, San Antonio] Through the process of "coming out" to his family and friends, however, he began to discover an interest in voting and a recognition that his personal rights were intertwined with his political rights.

When people talked about supporting LGBTQ issues and causes, a common theme was the evolution of their beliefs over time, which suggests that a process of acceptance has begun, though Latinos may be lagging in comparison to the cultural acceptance of LGBTQ individuals and issues among other communities. For example, one man talked about how he arrived at his support of LGBTQ issues as a result of having experienced racial discrimination as a Latino, which ultimately led him to support the rights of all people: "No I wasn't open to it, such as gay rights. If you had asked me back in 1980 about gay rights, I would have laughed at you, and I would have called you something that's inappropriate." [David L. Mendoza, 53, Democrat, El Paso]

Younger Latinos are generally more accepting and embracing of LGBTQ issues. Many of them have friends, teachers, or family members who are members of the LGBTQ community, and they are exposed to the issues through media and popular culture. It's as if a veil of threat or social fear is being lifted slowly. As one young woman asserted, "I see they don't always have the same rights as others . . . They're being treated differently. Everybody is supposed to be treated fair[ly]." [Celeste M. Garcia, 21, Independent, Houston]

At the same time, not all Latinos feel that growing social acceptance of the LGBTQ community is a positive thing. This seems to include somewhat older Latinos who are less accustomed to newer social and cultural attitudes, and to young Christian conservatives. As one such interviewee told us, "I think within the past couple of years, how it seems social media portrays abortion and feminism and the whole LGBTQ stuff, I kid you not, I feel it's kind of brainwashing." [Amanda Esparza, 29, Republican, Dallas]

6. The El Paso Shooting

On August 3, 2019, a violent mass shooting transpired at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. The 21-year-old White gunman from Allen, Texas, an affluent suburb of Dallas, shot and killed twenty-three people, injuring twenty-three others. He was arrested shortly after the shooting. A White nationalist and anti-immigrant manifesto he wrote described his motives, citing a right-wing "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory as inspiration and arguing that Whites are being replaced by Latinos in the United States.

The El Paso shooting reverberated among participants of our study far beyond El Paso. It took place while we were conducting interviews in our second interview site, San Antonio. Some of our interviewees there began talking about the shooting unprompted, often in deeply emotional ways.

Some Latinos we spoke with there and in our subsequent interview locations, including El Paso, expressed personal fear and resented feeling racially targeted as Mexican Americans and Latinos, something they feel has intensified in recent years. They also spoke of individual and community resilience, and about emotional mechanisms they were using to cope. Some said that the institutions they look to for physical and emotional protection—especially the government—have failed them.

For many Latinos, the El Paso shooting, perhaps more than any other event in recent memory, highlighted their recognition of being a racialized people in the United States. They expressed a growing awareness of their "otherness," and of being discriminated against and targeted due to that otherness.

At the same time, views of the shooting seemed to be significantly shaped by distinctive political views. For example, some participants interpreted the shooting as a clearly racist act of violence targeting Mexicans and Mexican Americans, while others were reluctant to clearly assign blame anywhere, or focused instead on the shooter's mental health condition. These differing perspectives existed even in El Paso. Whatever their interpretation of the shooter's motivations, people across the political spectrum did share the view that their sense of safety had been shaken by the shooting.

But despite national news attention to the event and the written manifesto that circulated widely on social media, as time passed, the El Paso shooting did not appear to turn into a galvanizing moment for Latinos across Texas.

Chapter 5: Politics in Context

FOUR VOTERS' STORIES

JAMIE MARTINEZ*
San Antonio

Jamie Martinez, 31 years old, is a third-generation Mexican-American. Originally from Houston, she grew up in the South Side of San Antonio, where she currently lives. She is married, with one child. Her husband, who is also Latino, is in the Army, so the couple moves every several years. Jamie has a degree in communications from the University of Texas at El Paso and is pursuing a Master of Social Work. She currently works as a social worker.

Jamie cares deeply about her community, and the needs of the children and families her program serves. She is also knowledgeable about politics. Jamie is highly educated, and she and her husband together make a solid middle-class income.

But Jamie does not vote. We asked Jamie, do you feel that your vote matters?

"This is going to sound really bad, but no, I don't think so...I feel that when you don't have money and when you don't have power, you don't really make those kinds of decisions. It's really hard to probably explain the way I want it to come out."

For Jamie, as of late 2019, the urgency to vote was not apparent.

"If I felt that my vote actually mattered and made a difference, then . . . [it] would be my responsibility to go out there and vote. But I don't have that feeling towards voting. At this time in my life, it's like, if I vote, okay, if I don't—I feel that if I did see some really big changes being made, then I would say, 'Yes, this is our responsibility. This is how we're going to change the world that we're living in and make a difference.' At this point, no."

Understanding Jamie's political detachment requires looking at her broader social context, including her family upbringing, social network, and education. Her parents separated when Jamie was young and she was raised by her father, who struggled to make ends meet.

"Voting was not something that we discussed, like, 'Hey, I voted here, this is how you do it.' Nobody ever told me. Honestly, I couldn't tell you how you were supposed to register to vote."

Jamie's high school experiences further reinforced her perception that voting didn't make a difference.

"One of my teachers that I did have in my law and research program just kind of ruined it for me.

He made me feel like there is no hope, like there is no point in trying to make a change because you're just one person in a world of millions and millions of people. If nothing has happened yet, then there's really no point."

And while she excelled academically, leading her to first attend the University of Texas in Austin, the weight of her background and upbringing manifested itself in a sense of powerlessness, and, at times, hopelessness. As the first person from her family to go to college, she had no support networks and few financial resources.

To this day, Jamie vividly recalls her advisor telling students: "Your freshman year is going to be the hardest because we are weeding people out. If you don't feel like you are going to make the cut, then you should go home now." And she did eventually leave the university, moving to several different educational institutions until she found the right teachers who supported her self-empowerment.

Jaime's reluctance to vote reflects her concern that she might cast a wrong vote or that a vote of hers may do more harm than good. She has a lack of confidence in her knowledge of the candidates and the outcome their actions may produce.

"If I voted for somebody and then they turn out to be something that is different from what they portrayed, or if they don't do the things that they said that they were going to do, I wouldn't say that I will take it personally, but I'll just be like, 'Oh, I helped this person get into office, and now they're not even doing what they said they were going to do.'"

Racism also plays a role in her decision not to vote. She says Latinos are often made to feel like they don't belong in the country and are dehumanized through political discourse.

"I feel that Hispanics and Mexicans have been vilified, because, I mean, I grew up in a Hispanic community. I'm Hispanic. We are hard workers. We work hard, we're resourceful, and I feel that the immigration process itself is not easy. You don't just come over here and say, 'Hey, I want to be a U.S. citizen' . . . And I feel that we're just creating a lot of anger and animosity that is unnecessary. Because to me, if somebody called one of my family members an illegal immigrant, I would be like, humans can't—we're not illegal. That's dehumanizing. That's not a proper term to use."

Yet, in the face of this, perhaps there is a silver lining. It had already sounded like Jamie was questioning her aversion to political engagement when we first spoke with her in August 2019. By the time we reconnected with her in May 2020, after the COVID-19 pandemic began, she was speaking differently. A course she had taken in her master's program and the government's response to the pandemic had both served as a civics lesson, making the urgency of voting more evident to her.

"I know at first I wasn't really too concerned with government, but this last class that I had was actually my policy class. We had to do a lot of legislative research and just really look into how bills are made and the process of all of that. It really just opened my eyes into my role as a future social worker for the communities that I do work with, and how I can be a better advocate for them. Maybe at one point, I did think that my vote didn't matter. But I think having that class and then going through [the pandemic] and having to research the stimulus package and the CARES Act and things like that, and watching city council meetings, just made me realize that even though I'm one person, maybe my vote could matter. If I advocated for not only myself, but for my community members, and maybe informed them of the whole process and gave them a better understanding, then they would be more willing to vote as well. Now, do I think that there's a really good

candidate? I don't know yet . . . I do think that even on the lower levels of government, that I'm more likely to participate in voting now more than ever. I don't know for sure yet who I would support, but I do know that I will vote."

*Jamie's real name has been changed to protect her anonymity.

CLAUDIA PEREZ
Houston

Claudia Perez, 36 years old, is a first-generation Mexican American born and raised in Houston. She lives in Spring Branch in the northwest part of the city, the same neighborhood where she grew up. Claudia has been married ten years and has four children. She works full-time and, as she described it, is also a "full-time mom."

Claudia's parents are from the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, and became U.S. citizens when Claudia was young. But they never voted.

"I started voting, I think, when I got married. That's when I started reading. Because with my parents, they became citizens before I even was eligible to vote, but they never went out to vote . . . I think that actually the [2016] election that just passed with the president, that was the first time they actually went out to vote. That's because I took my parents. I registered them and I took them. Because I told them, 'Well, you complain and complain and complain, but if you don't vote, then . . . you lose your right to complain because then you didn't even make your voice be heard."

Claudia's life experiences had a big impact on her relationship to politics. They served as her political awakening. By engaging with the immigration system through her husband's struggles to get his residency, and with the education system once her children entered school, Claudia was able to draw connections between government policy and her life.

"[My husband], he's from Panama . . . the immigration laws and all that affected him more than it affected me. Because to me, to be honest with you, a lot of the immigration laws and stuff that happens, if you're a citizen, it really doesn't affect you . . . When I got married, it was more of a real situation . . . He had his work permit, so I put in for his citizenship. I started learning more about the immigration laws. Even the costs . . . By voting, I'm going to make a difference. Because then I can't complain, 'Well, how come these people are not getting the help they need?' or 'How come their path to citizenship is taking so long?'"

Claudia's political interests extend beyond voting. For example, she volunteered to help with the Census, and she helps neighbors get informed about immigration regulations and what to do if ICE knocks on their door.

"I have friends who still are undocumented. I go knock on your door. We're giving out these little cards, that's what we're doing this week. Me and my friends . . . they're little cards that say: They knock on your door and make sure that you don't open the door. What to do, what are your rights and stuff . . . [I am more active] now than before because of all the process that I went through with my husband."

Claudia's politicization also stems from her role as a mother and her desire to support her children with their education. Claudia ran for a position in their school PTAs to ensure the students were being well-served, but as she grew into her role and responsibilities, she found the experience to be personally and politically empowering.

"I'm a board member at my kids' school. It was kind of like, I needed to know what was going on and everything . . . for me to know what was going on with my child, I started getting involved. But I liked it. I liked being able to know what was going on with my kids and how to delegate certain things. Because even at the school, it's very political in a sense."

At the same time, Claudia recognized that her Latino neighbors were not getting involved in the same way, and often don't feel like they belong in the schools or deserve to have their voice heard. So she took it upon herself to encourage them to feel more welcome within the PTA and developing reciprocal relationships. All the while, she encouraged them to use their voice to make requests from the school's administration.

"A lot of Hispanic parents don't even join the PTA because they don't even know what it's for or what does it do. What it is going to do for me? . . . Do you want to know what we started doing to get the parents to come into the school to vote? We had to have potlucks. Free food . . . we do lotería nights at our kids' schools. So the meetings, for the parent meetings, we have a lotería night where we give away baskets and stuff . . . Because I don't think that they think that even whatever they say at the school really counts . . . They would be very surprised that you can really change even what a principal is doing at a school, or how they're treating your children. You don't know how they're treating your children until you show up. You might think your child is just misbehaving, but it's not that. It's that they might need special education and you're not even being involved, so therefore, you don't know."

Building on these personal experiences, Claudia has broadened her scope of political interests to include local politics.

"I do follow more local [politics] than national because this is what affects me and my community. Because a lot of the stuff that happens nationally really doesn't affect me, as much as what happens here in my city does."

Claudia is a true Independent voter, open to either party, but without a clear allegiance to either. She chooses who to vote for based on the election and the candidates' proposals.

"If this person is doing something that I need or that is going to help me at the end of the day, then, you know what I mean? Here in Houston [municipal government], you have both of those parties but some of them are doing good and some of them are not. It just depends on what's going on at this point in time."

But she is skeptical of both parties, because she feels they only seek out Latinos when they need their votes. Otherwise, she said, they don't really listen to Latinos or advocate for their issues.

"It only happens when it's campaigning time. Now, the Latinos really matter. Now, we're looking for the Latinos... Only when you need them. And it's always the same with any campaign. Only when you need them, and it's only voting time that you recognize the Hispanics, because that is a big vote."

Claudia sees Latinos searching for political connection, even a small connection. But she feels that few political campaigns even try to personally engage with Latinos and form a relationship. Latinos are so used to being ignored, she said, that even a small gesture from a candidate can be very meaningful to them.

"If you want a Hispanic to come out here and have fun and talk to you and relate to you well, you give them something. Doesn't even matter, even if it is a pen. Trust me, a Hispanic will keep that pen and put that pen in their pocket."

Claudia now feels like a political leader—a citizen who has a responsibility to stay informed, vote, and make demands on the political systems that impact her family's life.

"I think I became a leader out of necessity. Because if I don't help myself, nobody's going to help me . . . It sounds weird, but if you're not White, trust me, nothing is given . . . I became who I became out of necessity. I learned, I read.

My husband is like, 'Why do you read so much? Why do you care, watching the news so much every night?' Because I care."

PETER ANTHONY GUZMAN
San Antonio

Peter Anthony Guzman, 28 years old, was born and raised on the South Side of San Antonio, a historically Latino neighborhood. He is a third-generation Mexican American. Peter is married with one infant son. He is pursuing an associate's degree in information technology and frequently works as a store clerk, but has suffered setbacks due to chronic health issues.

Peter follows politics on television and social media and has a solid understanding of how the government works, but has only voted once in his young life. He explains how he has often been on the cusp of voting, but then decides not to.

"I pass [the polling locations] all the time. 'Vote Here' signs, obviously, vote here . . . I've been tempted several times. I've gone to the parking lot and sat in the parking lot, [and I'll] just sit there and be like, 'No, I'm not going to do it.' And I'll take off . . . I just felt that my votes don't matter, our votes don't count. That's what stopped me."

When Peter says "our votes" don't matter, he's specifically referring to Latinos. Peter would love to see Latinos come together and make demands on the political system, but has rarely felt that experience.

"A lot of [Latinos] are afraid to vote. Because I feel that they don't believe in changes and they don't want to be put out there like that . . . I don't want to continue being in the shadows. I want Mexicans, Latinos everywhere, I want them to vote so they can experience change. I want them to actually feel that they are a part of something . . . I want to be motivated and convinced to do it, so I can go out there and tell them, 'Hey, let's do it, let's get this done. We should be out there voting.' Because from my understanding, Latinos have a low voting rate, right? That's something that I want to see change. I want to see somebody win the vote. I want to see Latinos voting to make a change and make a difference."

Peter first voted in 2008 because he was encouraged to do so in a school assembly his senior year in high school. He was inspired by Barack Obama's candidacy to be the first African-American president. But after the 2008 election, no one reinforced the importance of continuing to vote or helped Peter learn more so he could arrive at political decisions.

"No one really pushed me or really told me exactly what it means to vote. And I mean, right then and there, we had the assembly on how good it is to vote, and I was convinced at the time. I mean, I was 18 years old. And right then and there I was convinced to vote after that. Nobody really refreshed me on why is it good to vote, who you should vote for. And so, if this person's running or that person's running, why is it good to vote for them instead of them?"

After Donald Trump's election in 2016, Peter began paying more attention to politics and again began to feel that he should vote. But he realized he didn't understand what each of the parties stood for, and didn't want to make an uninformed choice.

"After Trump became president, it made me want to get more involved with the politics to see exactly what is going on. Why is it good to be a Democratic? Why is it good to be a Republican? . . . That's what I'm totally confused on. From what I see, from what people say and what I see on Facebook and voting sites and all that, I always see the fighting."

Peter's family and the people around him mostly don't vote, so he hasn't had an example to follow and does not have many people to turn to for insights.

"I mean, my whole family—my mom's not a voter, and my grandparents are not voters. My great-grandparents are not voters . . . My younger siblings, they're not voters. Nobody's voted. My family wasn't born and raised on politics and I feel like I want to change that."

But there are exceptions. His mother-in-law is very engaged with politics and hearing her talk about it deepens his curiosity. It was she who encouraged him to renew his voter registration card.

"We were watching [the news] and we were just talking. She was just going on for hours and hours throughout the whole [impeachment] interrogation that they were doing, the whole interview with [Robert Mueller]. And she convinced me to actually want to get more involved in politics. If it wasn't for my mother-in-law, then I wouldn't be wanting to pursue it more."

With more information and conviction that he can help bring about change, Peter is motivated to vote and get politically engaged. He wants to feel that he's a part of something bigger and is contributing to a greater good. At the same time, he feels the government isn't working in his interests, but in the interests of the powerful and of white Americans: "I feel like they favor them more because there's more of them who are actually wanting to step up."

But he hopes that eventually more Latinos will be in public office, and that more Latinos will vote so they can be empowered and not continue to experience so much racial profiling and discrimination.

"I don't want us to continue being in the shadows. I want Mexicans, Latinos, everyone—I want them to vote so they can experience changes. And I want them to actually feel that they are a part of something, and I want to be like that. I want to be able to be motivated and convinced to do it, so I can go out there and them once, 'Hey, let's do this. Let's get this done . . . I want to see Latinos voting to make a change and make a difference."

OSCAR J. NUÑEZ MARTINEZ
El Paso

Oscar J. Nuñez Martinez, 33 years old, was born and raised in Durango, Mexico. He was 10 years old when he and his family migrated to California to do farm work. They eventually settled in El Paso, where Oscar attended the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), the first in his family to go to college.

Oscar was able to attend UTEP thanks to an outreach program targeting the children of farm workers. Though he earned his degree in accounting, he chose to become an ESL teacher because he found it to be more personally rewarding.

"I somehow ended up teaching for the CAMP (College Assistant Migrant Program) program. Basically, my population is farm workers and sons of farm workers . . . I think I can see a little of my parents in the older males, and then a little of myself in what would have been me if my parents would have taken other turns in life."

To this day, Oscar remembers the hardship of farm work during the years he and his family lived in California.

"I remember, even though I was just in the fifth grade . . . [my parents] would leave [for work] at 4:30 a.m., so we would get up on our own and have to go to school. We would come back from the school and they wouldn't come back until seven—six [or] seven at night. That was every day. We wouldn't see them throughout the week, but we would see them at night."

These experiences shaped Oscar's political outlook, guided by a strong sense of empathy for working people and their struggles.

Oscar's father also exerted a powerful influence by encouraging him to vote, beginning in 2008, when Barack Obama ran for president. He told his son: "'You guys need to go vote. You guys can vote, and I can't." Oscar says, "That was the first time I ever voted."

Since that time, Oscar's fiancée has also played a positive role in his development of voting habits, because she is civically engaged and studied political science. She follows politics and has volunteered for political campaigns. His friend network, however, mostly consists of inactive voters, so Oscar often finds himself playing the role of encouraging them to vote, or answering questions they may have about elections and candidates.

For Oscar, the connection between voting and becoming politically engaged on behalf of others was established early. Today, his political viewpoints are hybrid, unique to his personal experiences and his ideas of how he can help his community.

"Sometimes, I get ideas from over here, sometimes I have ideas from over there. I'll never fully agree with either side. I think you have to judge whatever both sides are saying and take into account how that decision might impact your daily life, or the life of your family, your community, and whatnot."

Oscar also described the disconnect he sees between political parties and candidates and the everyday challenges that many Latino families face.

"When they say, 'we want Latinos to come out [to vote],' I feel that most of the time, this is like, 'I just need your vote.' That's it. Like, 'Just give me your vote, and I'm not making any promises' . . . Unless you interact with [Latinos], and you take time to interact with them, I don't think you're going to understand . . . I think when they say, 'Yes. [Latinos] have a hard life. They struggle with making payments' . . . [politicians will] never struggle, because they've never really gone to bed without eating. They just say those words and they're like, 'That's tough.' But they don't really know what tough is."

As a result, Oscar has often grown frustrated with the ways that politicians have not adequately represented the interests of Latinos. He sees this as leading, in turn, to failures by the government to properly allocate resources and provide services to Latinos.

"I think that's just human nature. You think of yourself first, then your family, then your friends, then everyone else. I think this is the same thing at the government level. Can they make my life better? Yes, they can. They could. Are they? I don't know. I feel that there's more that they could be doing, I feel that we waste a lot of resources in areas that don't need as much help, and yet they have those resources."

In addition, Oscar pointed to the ways that legacies of racism play a role in the city's structures of authority. Even in El Paso, where Latinos are 83 percent of the population, Oscar questions why there is such a racial imbalance among people in positions of power, and whether White elected officials and civic and business leaders are genuinely trying to understand how to help the Latino majority.

"I feel that [Latinos] are still the minority, because when you look at who sits at the top of the important jobs, you'll see just Caucasians, mostly. Not all the time, but you'll see a strong board of Caucasians . . . It's basically, it's primarily White last names . . . Why is it that mostly I see White? Are they really

thinking about us correctly when they don't know our background? Can they really represent me in the way that I need it . . . or they're just making assumptions?"

However, Oscar has found reason to believe that his vote can help influence electoral outcomes by turning his attention towards local and Congressional elections in recent years, instead of presidential elections.

"I think local [politics] matter, and I think when you vote for Congress, whether it's a Senator or a Representative, those [elections] matter. Now, I'm starting to see that, at least, for me, the presidential wouldn't really matter . . . because of the Electoral College . . . but I know that I'd still go because there's still [the] House of Representatives that's still at stake, and all these other things are at stake. I go for the other stuff, not so much for the presidential anymore."

Conclusion:

AUTHENTIC LISTENING AS A STRATEGY FOR EMPOWERMENT AND CHANGE

This report is the product of a couple hundred hours of careful listening to Latinos throughout Texas. Listening has been core to our methodology, which is rooted in our ethnographic and social science training.

This is an act we call Authentic Listening because our methodology was premised on asking questions without demanding answers. Instead, we sought to prompt Latinos to explain the world as they saw it, on their own terms.

Through listening, we learned. Even those on our team who have spent years studying, reading, researching and writing about Latinos in Texas learned new insights because of our methodology of authentic listening.

The Latinos we listened to are not well-known writers, activists, performers, celebrities, poets, or famous voices. They are people you might encounter anywhere. What we discovered in our research was in some ways surprising.

When we listened to Latinos closely, we heard voices with great power. They shared their wisdom and experiences, their hopes and fears. Some shed tears, some expressed hope, others shared jokes—often all from the same individual.

These voices hold great weight.

It is easy in our over-saturated media environment to lose sight of people who don't have a million followers on Twitter, to tune out the voices of "average" citizens, to talk over people. Many political leaders sound lost in political slogans and moral rationales about public policies or political debates.

The Latino voices we heard don't stand out as necessarily radical. And yet these are the people we're fighting for. The tragedy is that their voices are so valuable and yet so easily taken-for-granted in the rush to sway influence.

Listening Is Inconvenient to Many

Listening is undervalued in a political world where action, charisma, power, and force are held in high esteem. Even in a democratic system, political power is often generated by suppressing voices or only reluctantly accepting debate or dissenting voices. Worse yet, political leaders may presume to know what citizens think. They make many of those assumptions based on people's race, gender, ethnicity or class.

While those assumptions may generally hold true for society as a whole, they have their limits and

their blind spots. As one 31-year-old truck driver in Irving, Texas, taught us: "People aren't as straightforward as you think. They can lean any kind of way."

Indeed, every one of our interviews opened our eyes in a new way.

The idea that what we have to do is listen might sound inconvenient to political campaigns or activist projects trying to rally Latinos around various causes. But we need to keep in mind that for a long time now, no one has been authentically listening to Latino voices. Assuming that Latinos will automatically vote for one party or one kind of policy proposal is a problem.

Instead, our findings strongly suggest that empowerment and belonging are critical for getting people politically engaged. ***Overwhelmingly, we heard Latinos tell us that when people listen to them—including government officials, institutions, political parties, candidates, or simply an interviewer in a research project asking questions about their voting habits—they are inspired to become politically engaged.***

To give just one example: Pay careful attention to the words of Veronica, a 35-year-old Dallas woman who is a working-class, first-generation Mexican American, on the cusp of deciding to finally vote and participate politically for the first time:

"I feel that it's ignorance in the way I was raised. The reason why I haven't voted was because I was always raised [to think that] it doesn't matter if you vote. It doesn't matter if you speak up, because they're never going to listen to you. You're a minority, they're always going to see you [as] less . . . Now that I'm older, I'm like: No. That's not good enough. I have kids of my own. I have to teach them to do better and pave their own way. I have to set that example."

What Is Authentic Listening?

Pauline Oliveros, a queer Tejana artist born in Houston in 1932, revolutionized experimental music as a composer and performer through a practice she called "deep listening." She explained listening as being distinct from the physical act of hearing:

"In hearing, the ears take in all the sound waves and particles and deliver them to the audio cortex where the listening takes place. We cannot turn off our ears—the ears are always taking in sound information—but we can turn off our listening. How you're listening is how you develop a culture, and how a community of people listens is what creates their culture."

Listening is a cognitive act, by which we give special attention to the sounds that we hear. Listening is also a function of cultural beliefs, values, and upbringing. Because deciding what we should listen to, or what to ignore, is a process of education. It is something we learn. Figuring out who to listen to and who to ignore is not something we are born with. And that question of who we listen to—or who we don't listen to—also includes our own voice. ***Empowerment begins by listening to, and then believing, in that inner voice.***

Recognition of how listening works can shape our understanding of the world because it requires reassessing our value system. Whose voices matter? Whose voices do we value most? When we stack the deck differently and listen to those voices that are typically ignored, that is a powerful act. ***In short, listening can shape our politics, and in turn, our world.***

How to Lead By Listening

In our research, we conducted follow-up interviews with nonvoters and sporadic voters several months after our initial interviews. The results of these follow-up interviews were insightful and encouraging. And their implication is a final thought we want to leave you with.

Among nonvoters we spoke with who are changing their minds about voting, many referred to our initial research interview we'd had months before. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, about a quarter of them said they were now thinking about voting, talking about it, and engaging in broader political conversations with those around them. We heard an increasing awareness of civic responsibility and a clearer sense of what they believed they needed to do: Do research, learn more, and talk with others.

What was unexpected about this finding is that our research process never asked people to go vote. We posed questions, listened intently, took notes, and asked more questions. ***This suggests a viable pathway to get people voting based on authentic listening.*** This makes sense because, as noted throughout this study, many Latinos do not feel engaged, nor do they feel like political parties or candidates are really listening to them.

Based on this insight, we can imagine a program for political engagement that employs listening to empower and create momentum.

The Authentic Listening approach is relatively straightforward: Ask questions. Lead with curiosity. Listen to Latino voices. Record their words. Put your finger on the pulse. And then allow listening and learning to guide new directions.

Speak their language. Don't force them to speak yours.

The approach would be simple, though admittedly counterintuitive. Instead of pushing political ideas on Latinos, create connections and build bridges by encouraging them to talk about what they think. Ask them to speak politics on their own terms, in ways that make sense to them, rather than forcing them to listen to your language about policy or even political morality.

While this might sound ambiguous and imprecise, with a well-trained and positioned staff of active listeners, you can properly curate questions and focus the conversations on the most important and relevant issues that need to be tackled.

Consider, for example, a preliminary methodology. Set up 20-minute conversations on the phone with targeted individuals, with a follow-up three months later. This would not be a typical get out the vote call, but a listening engagement—similar to, and potentially overlapping with, a research effort. The conversations would be led by professional or trained interviewers.

The focus is almost therapeutic: listening in order to help people articulate their political sensibilities. A second focus would be on networking, in order to sustain those individuals' political engagement and amplify it. Encourage them to talk to their friends and family members. Political conversations have a ripple effect—people talk to other people, and communities of voting are born.

Once you have spent time listening and processing those conversations, find creative ways to feed back what people are saying with your organization serving as a mouthpiece. Share those stories with your members, and with other Latinos. Ask political candidates and elected leaders to listen. Create discursive relationships.

Conversation creates dialogue, and dialogue creates belonging.

If you take a pause from well-reasoned moral arguments and rational appeals around policy outcomes, you can begin to engage the real-life emotional conflicts Latinos are facing in their lives, which can ultimately fuel their desire to participate politically and help make change.

This approach may seem counterintuitive because it requires a long view of civic engagement and a degree of patience with meeting people where they're at. But making government count for everyone is the priority. Armed with the power of true understanding and connection, you can find more ways to keep bridging gaps. But finding those bridges begins by creating trust through authentic listening.

Appendix and Resources

1. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Total Interviews	104

Region

Houston	21
San Antonio	22
Dallas	20
El Paso	20
Rio Grande Valley	21

Gender

Male	52
Female	52

Political Party

Democrats	43
Republicans	21
Independent/No Affiliation	39
Libertarians	1

Age

Millennials (18-29)	28
Non-Millennials (30+)	76

Voting Frequency

Regular	47
Occasional	33
Nonvoters	24

*Participants self-reported their voting frequency. Some occasional voters may have represented themselves as regular voters.

Nationality

U.S.-born	76
Foreign-born	28

Ethnicity

Mexican	95
Guatemalan	3
Puerto Rican	3
Salvadoran	2
Ecuadorian	1
Peruvian	1
Saudi Arabian	1
Arab	1
Other	1

*Participants self-reported their ethnicity. Some had dual ethnicities.

Voting Frequency by Household Income

Poor (Less than $20,000)

Nonvoter	10	**43.5%**
Occasional voter	7	30.4%
Regular voter	6	**26.1%**

Working Class ($20,000 - $50,000)

Nonvoter	10	**24.4%**
Occasional voter	14	34.1%
Regular voter	17	**41.5%**

Middle Class ($50,000 - $100,000)

Nonvoter	3	**10.7%**
Occasional voter	9	32.1%
Regular voter	16	**57.1%**

Upper-Middle Class ($100,000+)

Nonvoter	1	**8.3%**
Occasional voter	3	25.0%
Regular voter	8	**66.7%**

*The data shows a perfect correlation between rising income and voting frequency, especially among nonvoters and regular voters.

2. INTERVIEW GUIDE

This guide offers different ways of asking questions that get at the issues that matter for this study. You do not have to ask every single question. Explore which ways of asking about these issues elicit the best answers.

Use these prompts to open up further discussion: Why? What do you think about that? How does that make you feel? Give me an example. Tell me more about that. Tell me a story.

1. Do You Vote?

This is a set of simple, straightforward questions around voting. If asked in an open-ended way, you can ask follow-up questions to deepen the discussion. This is also valuable information for baseline comparisons across interviews.

- Do you typically vote? For all elections, or just some elections? What elections do you tend to vote in? In general, do you pay more attention to certain elections than to others? Do you vote in midterm elections, for example?
- What motivates you to vote? Or, what are some of the reasons you don't vote?
- How would you describe the way you vote? Do you always vote for a certain political party, or do you vote based on specific candidates or elections? Why?
- If you identify with a specific political party, what attracts you to that party? What do you think about the Democratic Party? The Republican Party? What are the differences for you between the Republican and Democrat parties?
- Where do your political values come from? What has influenced those views? Did you always feel this way, think this way?
- Are there any issues on which you don't agree with your party? Or are there any issues that keep you from supporting a certain party?
- Do you identify with the terms "liberal" or "conservative"? What do those words mean to you? How about "progressive," "moderate" or "conservative"?
- Have you always voted the way you vote today, or have your voting patterns or your political values changed over time? When did you first begin to vote? Are there times when you have voted more or less often? Is there a specific issue, election or life experience that motivated you to start voting, or to vote more frequently?
- Do you remember when you registered to vote, and why you registered? If you are not registered, why have you not registered? Do you know how to register?
- Tell me about your experience going to the polls. Do you know where to go, and is it easy to get there? Do you understand the ballots and each of the elections on the ballots?
- Do you ever vote straight ticket? Why or why not?
- Who goes with you to vote? How do you feel when you're there, and after you vote?

2. Voting & Democracy

These questions attempt to approach the cynicism vs. engagement debate in a different manner. They're more open-ended, and more open to subjects' thoughts on what motivates voting, generally.

- Does voting matter? Why or why not? What's the impact of voting?
- Do you feel that your vote counts, that it makes a difference? Do you feel that everybody's vote counts the same?
- Do you see voting as a responsibility? A right, a privilege? How do you think about voting?
- Do you follow local politics and elections? How about state politics and elections? National politics and elections? Why? Which elections are most important to you?
- Do you know who represents you at every level of government? (Name the offices and ask specifically about them.)
- Do you feel that the United States functions as a democracy? Do you feel that we have a working democratic government?
- Do you feel that government can make your life better? How has it made your life better? Or how has it not made your life better?

3. Latinos & Voting

These questions attempt to explore the intersection of voting and Latino identity. They allow participants to offer their thoughts and reflect on how and whether ethnicity and race matter to them.

- How do you identify yourself? What labels do you use to describe your identity? Do you identify with the term "Latino"? How about "Hispanic"? "Latinx"? Why or why not?
- Do you identify or relate with the term "ethnic minority"? How about "person of color"? What do those terms mean to you?
- Have you ever been discriminated against or made to feel different?
- Is there such a thing as "the Latino vote"? Do you think that Latinos vote in similar ways, that they are a voting bloc? Do you think they have common political interests? Or, how do you make sense of Latinos' political values?
- Do you feel that enough Latinos vote? If not, why do you think more Latinos don't vote?
- What would it take to get more Latinos to vote? To get them to register? Do you have any ideas?
- Do you think Latinos are fairly represented in government? At the local, state, federal levels?
- Do you relate more to candidates and elected officials based on their race or ethnicity? Is that something you take into consideration? Are you drawn to Latino leaders, why or why not?
- Is it important to you that Latino candidates and elected officials speak Spanish? How about any candidates or leaders?

4. Culture of Voting & Civic Engagement

These questions explore the ways that cultural practices and communications—whether mass media or familial and friend networks—impact the way people learn about candidates and elections and how they vote.

- Does your family vote? Your friends, neighbors, or colleagues? How do you understand how they vote or why they don't vote?
- Do you discuss politics with others? Do people around you talk about voting, elections or candidates? If so, who does, and where do these conversations happen? Or, if not, why do you think that is?
- How do you decide who to vote for? What informs and influences your choices? Do you follow the news? If so, do you read, watch television, or follow social media? What channels or platforms, and in what language?
- Do campaigns and candidates talk to you? Call you? Text you? Do they send you mail? Have they ever knocked on your door? If so, how have those experiences been?
- Are you involved in your community in other ways besides voting? (This can include volunteering, participating in PTA's, sports leagues, etc.) Why? What motivates you to do that?

5. Candidates & Issues

These questions allow people to discuss what policy issues matter to them, what candidates they're drawn to, and what they look for in and expect from a leader.

- What policy issues are most important to you?
- Do you follow immigration issues? Where do you stand on that, and why?
- How about health care? Guns? Abortion? Climate change?
- Do you have strong religious values? Do your religious views influence how you vote?
- Are there other values you have that influence your political values, for example, cultural or social values?
- What do you value in a political leader? What do you expect from a political candidate?
- Do you usually know the candidates when you vote in an election?
- Do you know if you'll vote in the 2020 presidential election?
- How would you feel about having a female president?
- How do you feel about the impeachment proceedings against President Trump?
- How do you feel about the El Paso Walmart shooting?

6. Closing

- Where do you see this country going?
- What are your hopes and aspirations for yourself? For your family? For your community?

3. SUPPLEMENTAL COVID-19 QUESTIONS

1. What has your experience been with the pandemic? How has it affected your and your family's lives? How do you feel about it?

2. How do you feel the government is responding to the health and economic crisis?

Helping/hurting?

City, county, state vs. federal governments?

Unemployment benefits?

Small business vs. big business bailouts?

Ensuring public safety vs. protecting the economy?

3. Do you feel confident in government right now? Do you feel that the different levels of government are doing enough, or that should they do more?

4. Will you vote in the 2020 election? Did the pandemic or economic crisis change your feeling about voting? How so?

Planning to vote before? Now? If no, why?

If no: So even though the government is making a lot of decisions right now that impact your life, you don't feel that your vote would matter or that it could make a difference?

5. Are you registered to vote in November? If not, do you know how to register and by when you have to do it?

6. How do you feel about voting by mail? Should the state allow everyone to vote by mail this year if they do not feel safe voting in person? Would that make you more or less likely to vote?

4. RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHIES

Cecilia Ballí received her PhD in Anthropology from Rice University. She was an assistant professor at The University of Texas at Austin and has conducted ethnographic research on Tejano identity, the sexual killing of women in Ciudad Juárez, and the U.S.-Mexico border wall. She is currently a Visiting Researcher at UT Austin's Center for Mexican American Studies. She is also a journalist, and has been a writer-at-large at Texas Monthly since 2001. Her writing has additionally appeared in Harper's Magazine, The New York Times, the Columbia Journalism Review, and has been reprinted in multiple anthologies, including Best American Crime Writing (2004) and Hecho en Tejas: An Anthology of Texas Mexican Literature (2008). Ballí is the founder of Culture Concepts, a strategic and creative consultancy that provides ethnographic research, cultural analysis, storytelling, and strategic messaging. She lives in Houston.

Betsabeth Monica Lugo received her PhD in Sociology from the University of Texas at Austin in 2015. She was a Visiting Scholar in the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Houston from 2016 to 2018. Her research focuses on the ways race, gender, class and citizenship status intersect to shape the lived experience of Latino/a immigrants in the United States. She particularly focuses on the lived experience of Mexican immigrant mothers to illustrate the pervasive power of the nation-state to penetrate intimate life. Lugo's work is foregrounded in a discussion of historical and socio-political processes of illegalization that have rendered Mexican immigrants as illegal subjects. She is the author of "What Does It Mean to Return Home?: Mexican Women's Narratives of Hope and Uncertainty," published in Challenging Inequalities: Readings in Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration (2017). Another article produced in collaboration and entitled "When Researching the 'Other' Intersects with the 'Self': Women of Color Intimate Research" is published in Departures in Critical Qualitative Research (2020). A native of Chihuahua, Mexico, she lives in Dallas.

Michael Powell received his PhD in Anthropology from Rice University. There he developed methodological and analytical skills rooted in ethnographic research, including interviewing, participant-observation and symbolic analysis. For the past 15 years, Powell has worked as a researcher and consultant, coordinating, managing and leading research projects that integrate qualitative and quantitative data analysis. He brings a wide range of experience in qualitative research, cultural analysis, business consulting, design strategy and consumer branding. He has worked closely with executives, nonprofit leaders, designers and other creative producers, developing research-based strategies for a wide range of clients. Selected client industries include food retail, consumer packaged goods, transportation, higher education, urban districts, technology, and nonprofits. He lives in Houston.